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WARRIORS

DOVEWING'S SILENCE



SHORT STORY
EBOOK
EXCLUSIVE!

ERIN HUNTER

WARRIORS

DOVEWING'S
SILENCE

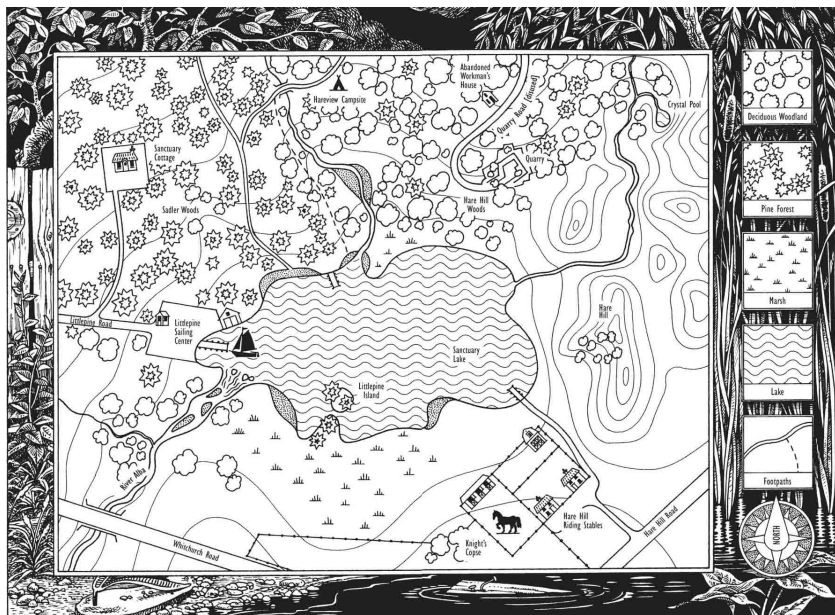
ERIN
HUNTER

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MAPS





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Victoria Holmes

DEDICATION

For RAH

ALLEGIANCES

	THUNDERCLAN
LEADER	BRAMBLESTAR—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes
DEPUTY	SQUIRRELFIGHT—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes
MEDICINE CATS	JAYFEATHER—gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes LEAFPOOL—light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes
WARRIORS	(toms and she-cats without kits) GRAYSTRIPE—long-haired gray tom DUSTPELT—dark brown tabby tom SANDSTORM—pale ginger she-cat with green eyes BRACKENFUR—golden-brown tabby tom CLOUDTAIL—long-haired white tom with blue eyes BRIGHTHEART—white she-cat with ginger patches MILLIE—striped gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes THORNCLAW—golden-brown tabby tom SPIDERLEG—long-limbed black tom with brown underbelly and amber eyes BIRCHFALL—light brown tabby tom WHITEWING—white she-cat with green eyes HAZELTAIL—small gray-and-white she-cat BERRYNOSE—cream-colored tom MOUSEWHISKER—gray-and-white tom CINDERHEART—gray tabby she-cat IVYPOOL—silver-and-white tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes LIONBLAZE—golden tabby tom with amber eyes FOXLEAP—reddish tabby tom APPRENTICE, CHERRYPAW (ginger she-cat) DOVEWING—pale gray she-cat with blue eyes ROSEPETAL—dark cream she-cat

	APPRENTICE, MOLEPAW (brown-and-cream tom)
	POPPYFROST—tortoiseshell she-cat
	BRIARLIGHT—dark brown she-cat with sky-colored eyes, paralyzed in her hindquarters
	BLOSSOMFALL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat
	TOADSTEP—black-and-white tom
	BUMBLESTRIPE—very pale gray tom with black stripes
	APPRENTICE, SEEDPAW (golden-brown she-cat)
QUEENS	(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)
	DAISY—cream, long-furred cat from the horseplace
	SORRELTAIL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with amber eyes (mother to Lilykit, a dark tabby she-kit with white patches, and Seedkit, a very pale ginger she-kit)
ELDERS	(former warriors and queens, now retired)
	PURDY—plump tabby, former loner with a gray muzzle
	SHADOWCLAN
LEADER	BLACKSTAR—large white tom with one jet-black forepaw
DEPUTY	ROWANCLAW—ginger tom
MEDICINE CAT	LITTLECLOUD—very small tabby tom
WARRIORS	CROWFROST—black-and-white tom
	TAWNYPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
	APPRENTICE, GRASSPAW (pale brown tabby she-cat)
	OWLCLAW—light brown tabby tom
	SHREWFOOT—gray she-cat with black paws
	SCORCHFUR—dark gray tom
	TIGERHEART—dark brown tabby tom
	FERRETCLAW—black-and-gray tom
	APPRENTICE, SPIKEPAW (dark brown tom)
	PINENOSE—black she-cat
	STOATFUR—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat
	POUNCETAIL—brown tabby tom
QUEENS	SNOWBIRD—pure-white she-cat
	DAWNPELT—cream-furred she-cat
ELDERS	SNAKETAIL—dark brown tom with tabby-striped tail
	WHITEWATER—white she-cat with long fur,

LEADER
DEPUTY

MEDICINE CAT
WARRIORS

QUEENS
ELDERS

LEADER
DEPUTY

MEDICINE CATS

WARRIORS

blind in one eye
RATSCAR—brown tom with long scar
across his back
OAKFUR—small brown tom
SMOKEFOOT—black tom
KINKFUR—tabby she-cat, with long fur
that sticks out at all angles
IVYTAIL—black, white, and tortoiseshell
she-cat

WINDCLAN

ONESTAR—brown tabby tom
HARESFRING—brown-and-white tom
APPRENTICE, SLIGHTPAW (black tom with
flash of white on his chest)
KESTRELFIGHT—mottled gray tom
CROWFEATHER—dark gray tom
APPRENTICE, FEATHERPAW (gray tabby she-
cat)
NIGHTCLOUD—black she-cat
APPRENTICE, HOOTPAW (dark gray tom)
GORSETAIL—very pale gray-and-white tom
with blue eyes
WEASELFUR—ginger tom with white paws
LEAFTAIL—dark tabby tom, amber eyes
APPRENTICE, OATPAW (pale brown tabby
tom)
EMBERFOOT—gray tom with two dark
paws
HEATHERTAIL—light brown tabby she-cat
with blue eyes
BREEZEPELT—black tom with amber eyes
FURZEPELT—gray-and-white she-cat
CROUCHFOOT—ginger tom
LARKWING—pale brown tabby she-cat
SEDGEWHISKER—light brown tabby she-cat
WHISKERNOSE—light brown tom
WHITETAIL—small white she-cat

RIVERCLAN

MISTYSTAR—gray she-cat with blue eyes
REEDWHISKER—black tom
APPRENTICE, LIZARDPAW (light brown tom)
MOTHWING—dappled golden she-cat
WILLOWSHINE—gray tabby she-cat
MINTFUR—light gray tabby tom
MINNOWTAIL—dark gray she-cat
MALLOWNOSE—light brown tabby tom
APPRENTICE, HAVENPAW (black-and-white
she-cat)

QUEENS

ELDERS

GRASSPELT—light brown tom
DUSKFUR—brown tabby she-cat
MOSSPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

APPRENTICE, PERCHPAW (gray-and-white she-cat)

SHIMMERPELT—silver she-cat

LAKEHEART—gray tabby she-cat

HERONWING—dark gray-and-black tom

ICEWING—white she-cat with blue eyes

PETALFUR—gray-and-white she-cat

POUNCEFOOT—ginger-and-white tom

PEBBLEFOOT—mottled gray tom

RUSHTAIL—light brown tabby tom

CATS OUTSIDE CLANS

SMOKY—muscular gray-and-white tom
who lives in a barn at the horseplace

CORIANDER—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat
who lives with Smoky

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CHAPTER 1



Dovewing stood very still in the center of the camp as silence crashed over the forest. From the corner of her eye she saw two pale shapes, a badger with a long striped nose and a hairless cat with swollen blind eyes. They nodded to her, then walked out of the hollow. For a moment Dovewing wanted to chase after them, to haul them back and demand to know what happened next.

Midnight! Rock! How can you leave us like this? The Dark Forest may have been defeated but we have lost everything!

The quiet beneath the trees was broken by a muffled sob. Sandstorm was crouching beside Firestar's unmoving body, which still lay at the foot of the lightning-scorched tree.

"We have lost everything," Dovewing whispered out loud.

She watched Leafpool press a wad of cobweb onto a bite wound on Cinderheart's flank; Lionblaze stood over them, the tip of his tail twitching anxiously, until Leafpool sent him away to fetch marigold and tansy from the medicine cats' den.

Millie touched Dovewing's shoulder with her muzzle. "Are you hurt?" she mewed.

Dovewing shook her head. In truth, she had no idea what wounds she had suffered in the terrible blood-soaked skirmishes; she felt numb from her nose to her claws, and her ears were still buzzing from the sounds of the battle.

"Then come help us," Millie prompted. She steered Dovewing gently over to the edge of the clearing where the bodies of Hollyleaf, Mousefur, and Ferncloud were being arranged. Dustpelt was staring down at Ferncloud, his dark tabby coat matted with blood and patchy where tufts of fur had been ripped out.

"You need to see Leafpool," Icecloud prompted him, pausing as she carefully straightened Ferncloud's feather-soft tail. "I'll stay here."

"I will never leave Ferncloud's side again," Dustpelt snarled. He slammed his

paw onto the ground, his claw-tips scoring the soil. "I should have been with her. She should never have been left to fight Brokenstar alone. She was nothing but a scrap of prey for him!"

Icecloud glanced up at him with a glint of anger in her pale blue gaze. "My mother gave her life to protect the nursery. She died the death of a warrior. Don't take that away from her."

Spiderleg limped up and rested his tail on his father's shoulder. "I'm sure Leafpool can come see you while you're here," he told Dustpelt. "We should all be with her now. Birchfall has taken Foxleap to the medicine den, then he and Leafpool will join us."

Dovewing felt a stab of grief for her father. Poor Birchfall. Ferncloud was his mother as well as Icecloud's and Foxleap's. He would feel her loss hard.

Dovewing jumped as Whitewing appeared beside her. The white she-cat's pelt was streaked scarlet with blood, and Dovewing opened her mouth to protest that she should be in the medicine cats' den. Her mother quickly shook her head. "It's not mine," she meowed. "Can you help Purdy?" She gestured with her muzzle toward the old tabby tom, who was struggling to fold Mousefur's paws beneath her.

There was an invisible stone lodged in Dovewing's throat that made it impossible to speak, but she went over to Purdy and held Mousefur's leg still while he gently curled her feet under her belly as if she was sleeping. The old tom's eyes were overflowing, and his breath rasped in his chest.

Dovewing was distracted by a stir at the entrance to the hollow. Jayfeather and Brambleclaw were standing by the flattened tangle of thorns that had once protected the camp. "I'm leaving now for the Moonpool," Brambleclaw announced, his voice ringing beneath the night-black sky. "More than ever, ThunderClan needs a leader." He faltered as he gazed at the flame-colored body in the shadows. More quietly, he went on, "And now, it seems I must be that leader." He nodded to Squirrelflight, who was watching him with her green eyes brimming with sorrow. "Squirrelflight, as my deputy, I leave the Clan under your charge."

Without another word, he turned and bounded over the thorns. Jayfeather followed more slowly, his gray pelt the color of clouds in the moonlight.

Squirrelflight climbed the rocks to Highledge as if every bone in her body was in pain, and looked down at her Clanmates. "Before we do anything else, we must see to our wounds. Check yourself carefully and go to the medicine den if you are hurt." Her voice was dull as if the battle had bled out her ability to feel anything. "The time is past for heroes," she meowed. "The Clan needs you to be strong now. So if you have any injuries at all, get them treated." She narrowed her eyes at Dustpelt, who had wrenched his gaze away from Ferncloud. "That means you too," Squirrelflight finished.

Dovewing glanced at her flanks and looked briefly at each paw but she couldn't see any wounds that needed urgent attention. She started to lick Mousefur's ears to clean them, but Purdy placed his tail-tip on her shoulder. "I can take care of her now," he mewed gruffly.

Dovewing nodded and took a step back to let the old cat shuffle closer to Mousefur's head. She closed her eyes in pain as Purdy's tongue rasped over his denmate's pelt. *What will he do without you, Mousefur?*

Beside her, a silver-and-white she-cat was picking leaf scraps from Hollyleaf's fur. Dovewing pressed her flank against her sister. "Are you okay, Ivypool?"

The silver-and-white cat nodded without looking up. "I'm alive, aren't I? Thanks to Hollyleaf." Ivypool traced her muzzle over Hollyleaf's back. "If it hadn't been for her, Hawkfrost would have killed me. Hollyleaf gave her life for mine!"

Dovewing winced at the tremor in Ivypool's voice. "Remember that Hollyleaf is watching you now," she murmured. "She will never regret what she did."

From the other side of Hollyleaf's body, Daisy nodded. She was untangling the long black fur with her claws, teasing out the knots as gently as if Hollyleaf could feel every tug. "Hollyleaf died as a true warrior," she agreed.

Dovewing looked around at the sound of paw steps. Brackenfur was pacing across the clearing, his tail flicking. "Has anyone seen Sorreltail?" he called.

Brightheart emerged from the remains of the elders' den, the white patches on her fur glowing in the half-light. Muffled sounds of her three kits came from deep within the crushed branches.

"Is it safe to come out now?"

"Have those dead cats gone? They were bad!"

"Ow! Dewkit's treading on me!"

Brightheart glanced over her shoulder. The skin on her ravaged face was taut and red from strain. "Wait there!" she meowed. "You can come out soon, I promise." She turned back to Brackenfur. "I saw Sorreltail go into the nursery. You should try there first."

"Thanks." Brackenfur trotted toward the clump of brambles, miraculously intact thanks to Ferncloud's courage.

Dovewing shook her head, trying to clear the buzzing from her ears. *Something's wrong*, she thought. The hair along her spine rose. *I should be able to hear Sorreltail—but I can't.*

"Are you feeling all right?" Ivypool asked.

Dovewing didn't take her eyes from the nursery as she watched Brackenfur slip inside. "I'm fine," she murmured.

"No."

Brackenfur's single word dropped like a stone into the hush of the clearing. Dovewing was at the entrance to the nursery before she realized her paws were moving. Brackenfur was standing at the edge of Sorreltail's nest, looking down at his mate's unmoving body. The air was thick with the stench of blood, and Dovewing felt it sticky and liquid beneath her pads.

A tiny dark tabby head with white patches popped up from behind Sorreltail, her blue eyes huge and worried. "We can't wake her!" Lilykit squeaked. "We tried and tried but she's still asleep!"

Her sister Seedkit appeared. Her pale ginger fur was fluffed in all directions, making her look like a hedgehog. "Is she really tired from the fighting, do you think?"

"Tired . . ." Brackenfur whispered without lifting his gaze from Sorreltail's sweet face. The she-cat's eyes were lightly closed as if she had just dozed off.

"Lilykit, Seedkit, come with me," Dovewing urged, her voice coming out as a croak.

The kits scrambled over Sorreltail's body. "Sorry, Mama," Lilykit mewed when her paw slipped into Sorreltail's ear.

Dovewing tried not to flinch when she saw that the kits' belly fur was soaked with blood. She glanced sideways at Brackenfur, but he hadn't noticed. His legs had crumpled beneath him and he was curled around Sorreltail's head, pressing his muzzle against her.

"Wake up, my love," he murmured. "Our kits need you. We can't lose you now."

Dovewing nudged the kits toward the entrance. "I think Papa is sad," Seedkit chirped. "Shall I stay and make him feel better?"

"No, let's leave him be," Dovewing urged. She followed the kits into the clearing. Several cats were waiting outside, eyes wide and anxious. Brightheart let out a gasp when she saw the bloodstained little cats. As she bounded forward, she called over her shoulder, "Cloudtail? Tell our kits to stay where they are." Her mate trotted to the remains of the elders' den while Brightheart pulled Lilykit and Seedkit to her belly with her tail and began licking their soiled fur. Over their heads, she met Dovewing's gaze with a question in her eyes. Dovewing nodded. Brightheart bent over Sorreltail's kits and drew them closer.

Squirrelflight padded over. "What's going on?"

"Sorreltail is dead," Dovewing meowed, each word dragged out with claws sharp as thorns.

Cherrypaw visibly swayed on her paws, and Whitewing closed her eyes with a grimace of pain. Squirrelflight looked baffled. "But . . . but she was fine. She didn't say anything about being hurt." The dark ginger cat looked around at her Clanmates. "Didn't anyone notice she'd been injured?"

Sandstorm walked forward, her eyes still wet with grief for Firestar. She rested her tail on Squirrelflight's shoulder. "If she was injured that badly, we couldn't have done anything to help her."

Squirrelflight lashed her tail. "We could have tried!"

There was a wail from inside the nursery. "Sorreltail! Don't leave me!"

"I'll go to him," Millie offered, slipping into the brambles. "He shouldn't be alone at this time."

Graystripe stepped forward. With a shock, Dovewing realized he looked old and tired. "The Dark Forest has claimed another victim," the warrior declared. "May Sorreltail watch over us from StarClan." He bowed his head.

Squirrelflight paced anxiously around the cats. "I told you all to check yourselves for injuries. Have you done it yet? I won't have any other cats die on me!"

Dovewing felt a stab of guilt as she licked at the scratch on her flank. She should get it treated before it got infected. She headed toward the medicine cats' den. Inside, Spiderleg was helping Leafpool pad the gaping bite wound in Foxleap's belly with crushed leaves. Foxleap lay very still, only the flickering of his eyelids proving that he was alive.

Leafpool looked up. "Are you hurt, Dovewing? Can it wait?" Her amber eyes were huge with distress.

"Sorreltail died," Dovewing meowed.

Leafpool jumped up, almost tripping over Foxleap. "What? She didn't tell me she was hurt!"

"She didn't tell anyone," Dovewing whispered. "I think she just wanted to be with her kits."

The medicine cat's shoulders slumped. "There is nothing I can do for her now. Let me finish treating Foxleap, then I'll bring some herbs and cobweb outside to treat you and anyone else that I haven't seen yet."

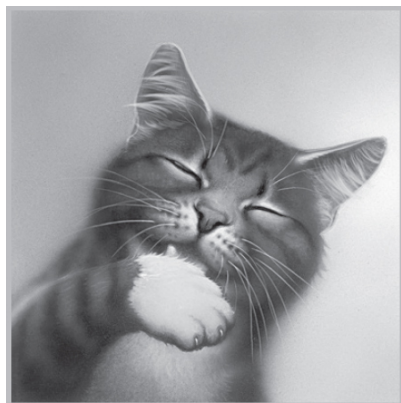
Dovewing padded back to the clearing. The three bodies of her fallen Clanmates were surrounded by little knots of their kin and closest friends. Ivypool was hunched beside Hollyleaf, licking the soft black fur on her shoulder. Bumblestripe was next to his father at Firestar's body. The pale gray tom caught Dovewing's eye and twitched his ears, as if offering to join her instead, but Dovewing shook her head. Graystripe needed him more right now.

Cloudtail and Berrynose were picking through the remains of the warriors' den, trying to drag out scraps of bedding. As Dovewing watched, Squirrelflight went over to them and told them to stop.

"We'll get nothing done tonight," she meowed, sounding calmer now, more like a Clan deputy. "We should all get some rest before Brambleclaw returns."

He'll be Bramblestar by then, Dovewing thought. She found a patch of clean sand close to the tree stump where apprentices loved to practice leaping and settled down. Curling her tail over her front paws, she looked up at the pale stars and tried to spot the new warriors of StarClan that had been born this night. But the stars were nothing more than cold glints of light in a depthless sky, and Dovewing felt no comfort from them. *Did we really win the battle? Because this doesn't feel like a victory.*

She pricked her ears, straining to hear how the other Clans were coping with their dead and wounded, but all she heard was a soft rushing sound like wind through leaf-heavy trees. The forest loomed around the hollow, dark and thick with shadows full of menace, and Dovewing wondered if she would ever feel safe again.



CHAPTER 2



Dovewing woke to find pale dawn light filtering through the leafless branches. She was bitterly cold, and her breath hung in clouds in the still air. All around the clearing, her Clanmates were stirring from where they had slept beneath the sky, huddled around the fallen warriors. Sorreltail's body had been brought out of the nursery during the night and laid next to Mousefur, a splash of light color against Mousefur's soft brown pelt. Brackenfur crouched beside his dead mate, his eyes closed, though Dovewing doubted he had slept for a moment.

A dark tabby shape moved through the clearing, gently rousing each cat. It was Purdy, his muzzle looking grayer than ever and his pelt ruffled with lack of rest. "Our vigil is over," he meowed quietly to his Clanmates. "These cats must be laid in the ground." When Molepaw responded with a grunt of protest, Purdy told him, "I am the only elder left. I cannot bury them alone. I need your help."

Abashed, the young brown-and-cream tom scrambled to his paws and followed Purdy across the clearing to where the dead cats lay. Others joined them: Graystripe, Rosepetal, Blossomfall, and Bumblestripe. Dovewing fell in behind them, stumbling on paws that felt as cold as stone. As she passed the tangled remnants of the elders' den, she heard muffled squeaks, loud enough to suggest that Daisy and Brightheart had made room for Sorreltail's kits in there as well and were keeping them away from the clearing for as long as they possibly could.

Bumblestripe headed for Firestar's body, and Dovewing watched her sister pad up to Hollyleaf, her shoulders hunched with grief. Dovewing followed and gently took one side of Hollyleaf's scruff in her mouth. From the corner of her eye she saw her father go up to Ferncloud. Icecloud and Spiderleg stood beside the little gray body, their heads bowed and their flanks hollow with exhaustion. As Birchfall approached, Dustpelt stepped forward, blocking Ferncloud from view.

"We can manage, Birchfall," he mewed.

The tip of Birchfall's tail twitched. "She was my mother. I want to carry her on her last journey."

Dustpelt flattened his ears. "You gave up that right when you betrayed your Clan," he growled, so softly that Dovewing could hardly hear. She let go of Hollyleaf's scruff and shook her head impatiently, trying to sharpen her senses.

To her surprise, Birchfall didn't argue. Instead he turned and walked back to the warriors' den. Dovewing opened her mouth to call after him but Ivypool caught her eye.

"Don't say anything," she warned. "Let's get this done first." She bent down and took hold of the other side of Hollyleaf's neck fur. Poppyfrost and Cloudtail gripped the loose skin on her haunches. Their eyes were dark with sorrow. Dovewing noticed Thornclaw, Mousewhisker, and Blossomfall following her father back to the den. Had their help been turned down as well? A prickle of alarm stirred beneath Dovewing's fur. *Are they being shunned by the other cats because they trained with the Dark Forest?* She was distracted as the others hefted Hollyleaf off the ground, and she had to splay her paws to take her share of the weight. Hollyleaf wasn't heavy, but her cold, stiff form was awkward and unwieldy to move, swinging between the four cats and knocking them off balance. Dustpelt and Spiderleg carried Ferncloud between them as if she weighed no more than a piece of thistledown. Icecloud walked behind with her mother's tail draped over her shoulder. Bumblestripe, Lionblaze, Cinderheart, and Purdy bore Mousefur among them, the old she-cat silenced forever, her jaws hanging slightly open as if she had something more to say. Firestar was carried by Sandstorm, Graystripe, Squirrelflight, and Millie. Dovewing heard the gray tabby she-cat murmur, "We were born as kittypets, but look at us now, my precious friend."

At first Brackenfur seemed reluctant to let anyone else touch Sorreltail, as if they might disturb her. Gently Rosepetal, Berrynose, and Whitewing pressed around the queen's body and lifted her as carefully as if she were a newborn kit. Brackenfur stooped to cradle Sorreltail's chin on the back of his neck. His grief clung like mist to his ruffled pelt and Dovewing had to look away.

Leafpool led the sad procession out of the hollow and into the oldest part of the woods in ThunderClan territory, between the camp and the lakeshore, where oak trees grew twisted and silver with age. The ground here was soft and thick with moss, making it easier to dig. The cats laid down their precious burdens in a row and stepped back to let Leafpool stand over each fallen warrior and send them on their journey to StarClan.

They are already there, thought Dovewing, recalling the glittering shapes she had seen filing out of the battle-torn camp. She glanced around, looking for the cats who had returned to the warriors' den. Toadstep and Hazeltail had joined the procession of fallen cats but there was no sign of the others. "Birchfall isn't here!" she whispered to Ivypool. "Do you think we should fetch him?"

Her sister looked at her with anger in her eyes. "Our father isn't here because he knows he wouldn't be welcome. Every cat knows that Birchfall fought on the side of the Dark Forest. Same for Thornclaw, Mousewhisker, and Blossomfall. They are traitors. As am I, to some of our Clanmates."

"That's so unfair!" Dovewing protested under her breath. "All of those cats switched allegiance thanks to you."

Ivypool bent her silver-and-white head. "Our sins are not easily forgiven, not when the battle lost us so many cats. Hollyleaf only died because she saved me from Hawkfrost." Her whole body shuddered. "Perhaps it should be me lying there instead."

Dovewing stepped closer to her sister and wrapped her tail over Ivypool's flank. "Never say that!" she hissed. "Hollyleaf knew what she was doing. She died as a true warrior, don't forget."

Leafpool finished the words of the ceremony, wishing each cat a safe and swift journey to their starry ancestors and promising to see them again. She walked slowly along the line of dead cats, touching her muzzle to each still, cool head. She paused longest beside Hollyleaf, her lips moving as she whispered one last message to her daughter. Dovewing found herself instinctively pricking her ears to listen, then turned away. Whatever Leafpool was saying, it wasn't for anyone but Hollyleaf to hear. Dovewing hoped the black she-cat was listening, wherever she was.

Squirrelflight joined Leafpool beside Hollyleaf and stood in silence for a moment. The deputy's eyes were closed and her shoulders were hunched with pain. Then she opened her eyes and raised her head. "Only we know the debt that we owe to these cats. It is up to each of us to make sure that their deaths were not in vain." She looked down at Firestar and reached out with her front paw to touch his cheek. "Sleep well, my father," she whispered.

Purdy stepped forward. "Don't dig the holes too close together," he rasped. "They must be at least one fox-length deep. For safety, like," he added, shuffling his paws. "Oh, an' if the hole starts fillin' with water, leave it an' dig another further up the slope."

"Thank you for sharing your knowledge with us, Purdy," Squirrelflight meowed. "Is there anything else?"

The old tabby cat twitched his ears. "Well, Mousefur used to like watchin' the sun go down over the lake. She said it looked like the water was on fire." His voice trailed off and he swallowed. "So I was goin' to bury her where she'd still get a good view. P'raps over there." He nodded toward a grassy mound with a clear line of sight to the lake. "I know she's not really here, but it feels like the right place for her."

Sandstorm moved beside him and ran her tail over his bony spine. "It's a lovely idea, Purdy. Of course we can do that."

Dovewing blinked away the moisture that was gathering in her eyes. "Come on," she mewed to Ivypool. "Let's find a place for Hollyleaf."

The cats began to move quietly through the trees, choosing soft but well-drained spots for each hole. Poppyfrost stopped beside a young holly bush growing beside the mound that Purdy had selected for Mousefur. "What about here?" she called over her shoulder.

Cloudtail walked over and prodded the soil with his paw. "Yes, this should be okay." He started to scrape away the leaf mulch, pushing it further under the tree. Dovewing and Ivypool went over to join him and began to scoop up the earth. On top of the mound, she heard Bumblestripe, Cinderheart, and Lionblaze marking a space for Mousefur.

"Make it a bit longer," Purdy ordered. "Give 'er room to stretch out."

Silence fell among the trees, apart from the sounds of digging and an

occasional grunt of effort. Dovewing's fur felt hot and prickly but she kept going, even though damp earth was wedged uncomfortably beneath her claws and her eyes stung from bits of dirt that flicked up from Ivypool's paws. Poppyfrost and Cloudtail worked at the other end of the hole, cramped against the holly bush but uncomplaining even when sharp-pointed leaves pricked their skin.

"Ow!" There was an exclamation followed by a muffled curse from somewhere above Dovewing's head. She looked up and saw Lionblaze holding up his front paw. Blood dripped from a broken claw.

Cinderheart bounded over to him. "What happened?"

Lionblaze shook his paws, scattering scarlet drops onto the moss. "I caught it on a root," he meowed. "I'm okay."

Cinderheart tipped her head on one side. "Are you sure?" Her voice was heavy with meaning, and Dovewing understood. Lionblaze wasn't supposed to get hurt like other cats. It was the power that made him invincible in battle. If the Dark Forest cats couldn't injure him, why should a harmless tree root?

Lionblaze turned back to the hole. "I told you, it's nothing," he growled, his voice muffled by flying earth.

Dovewing started digging again. *It doesn't mean anything*, she told herself. *Lionblaze is exhausted from the battle. He can't protect himself like he usually does.* The buzzing in her ears drowned out the sound of her paws scrabbling in the dirt until Dovewing could hear nothing except her own breathing.

At last the five cats had been laid in their earthy nests and covered over. Purdy checked each one carefully to make sure that no scent clung to the top layer of leaves. "We don't want to attract anything that might be hungry," he explained. Dovewing felt a rush of affection for the old cat. At this moment, no one would ever think he wasn't Clanborn, and had never been a warrior.

The cats trailed back to the hollow and sank down in the clearing, too exhausted to fetch anything from the fresh-kill pile. It was well-stocked with two sparrows and a squirrel; Dovewing guessed that Birchfall and the others had gone hunting. A gesture of reconciliation, she wondered? But she noticed that none of the cats who had been involved in the burials made any effort to thank their Clanmates, or even speak to them. Dovewing winced as Dustpelt walked straight past Birchfall without looking at him. *He's your son!* she wanted to yowl. *He's not your enemy!*

Night was falling and cats were just starting to stir in search of their temporary nests when the sound of paw steps came from the entrance to the hollow and Bramblestar leaped over the flattened brambles. Jayfeather followed more cautiously, picking his way through the tendrils.

Dovewing stared at the new ThunderClan leader. His dark brown coat looked glossier than before, as if lit by starshine, and his amber eyes glowed. Was that because he had been given nine lives? Dovewing strained to hear the whispers of StarClan warriors around him, but there was nothing but the sound of her Clanmates moving tiredly through the camp. She scolded herself for being fanciful.

Squirrelflight limped over to meet Bramblestar in the center of the hollow. "Welcome back," she purred, dipping her head. She seemed to be in awe of him too.

Bramblestar looked around and narrowed his eyes when he saw Birchfall, Thornclaw, Mousewhisker, and Blossomfall sitting at the edge of the clearing, a little distance off from the other cats. "What's going on?" he mewed. "Haven't you all been burying the others today?"

Squirrelflight moved closer to Bramblestar. She spoke close to his ear, the flicking of her tail-tip betraying her discomfort. Dovewing leaned toward them, straining to hear what the deputy was saying.

"I don't think that's a conversation for your ears," meowed a voice behind her.

Dovewing jumped and looked around to see her mother watching her with concern in her pale blue eyes. "You . . . you said you can hear things," Whitewing went on. "Even when you're not close enough to listen like other cats."

Dovewing nodded. To her surprise, Whitewing sighed and stroked Dovewing's shoulder with her tail. "That must feel very strange," she murmured. "Do you ever get any peace? I wish you had told me sooner. I might have been able to help."

"It was part of a prophecy," Dovewing mewed, feeling very uncomfortable. "I was given this power to help the Clans against the Dark Forest. It's okay, I promise."

Her mother straightened up, still looking troubled. "If you ever want to talk to me about it, I'm always here." She nodded toward Bramblestar and Squirrelflight. "And I still think that even if you *can* hear something, it doesn't mean that you *should*."

Dovewing glanced down at her paws. "It's okay," she mewed. "I can't make out what they're saying anyway. My ears haven't stopped buzzing from the battle yet, and my head hurts."

"Why don't you go and see if Jayfeather can give you something for that?" Whitewing prompted. "All the injuries have been treated now. There's no need for you to be in pain."

Dovewing padded to the entrance to the medicine den and peered through the screen of brambles. "Jayfeather? May I come in?"

The medicine cat's head appeared through the fronds. His fur stood on end and his face was taut with tension. "Is it urgent?" he snapped. "Leafpool's asleep and I'm in the middle of changing Foxleap's dressings."

"How is he?" Dovewing asked, her belly tightening.

Jayfeather looked over his shoulder at the warrior, who was a faint hunched shape inside the den. Briarlight was propped on her forelegs beside him, licking his ears. "Not good," Jayfeather replied. "Now, what do you want?"

"It's okay, it can wait," Dovewing meowed. She started to back away. "I'll come back tomorrow if I need to."

Jayfeather vanished back into the den, leaving Dovewing staring at the quivering brambles. She was used to Jayfeather's short temper and brisk manner, but this was different. He seemed . . . frightened. But what could be more terrifying than the attack from the Dark Forest? The battle had been won. Surely there was nothing left to be scared of?



CHAPTER 3



“Ouch! Mind my eyes!”

“Sorry!” Dovewing dropped her end of the bramble and backed off to let Bumblestripe scramble clear. They were working on the collapsed wall of the warriors’ den. Dustpelt was supposed to be supervising but he had vanished; Dovewing guessed he was visiting Ferncloud’s burial place. It had only been two sunrises since they buried the cats who fell in the battle, and neither Dustpelt nor Brackenfur seemed willing to leave their mates alone in their cold earthen nests. None of their Clanmates had challenged them on it; there was nothing but compassion for their unspeakable grief.

The cats who had fought briefly on the side of the Dark Forest, however, were still being treated as if they had greencough. They had taken to sleeping separately in a space behind the elders’ den. Last night Ivypool had joined them, and Dovewing wondered if her sister felt guilty because she seemed to be treated more favorably by the cats who had seen her take on Hawkfrost. Dovewing’s pelt pricked at the injustice of the situation, and she waited for Bramblestar to say something but he was busy with Squirrelflight, organizing patrols to hunt for food and repair the dens.

Bumblestripe nudged Dovewing. “It’s all right, I think I escaped with my sight,” he joked. “Come on, help me untangle this ivy.” They started to unravel the knot of dark green leaves. All the cats were trying to salvage as much of the dens as they could to save having to find fresh leafy branches so late in the season.

Suddenly Cinderheart, who was working on the other side of the wall, let out a soft mew. “Blackstar’s here!”

Dovewing peered around the den and saw the ShadowClan leader hobble into the clearing with his deputy Rowanclaw close beside him—so close, in fact, that their shoulders were touching, as if Rowanclaw was holding his leader upright.

Bumblestripe put down the ivy and came to stand beside Dovewing. "I wonder what he wants?"

There was no suspicion in his tone; in fact, none of the ThunderClan cats who had stopped working to watch the new arrivals were bristling with hostility. *The Dark Forest has changed everything*, Dovewing mused, recalling a time not so long ago when these visitors would have been treated with distrust. Now they hadn't even been challenged as they slowly entered the hollow.

"Blackstar! Come and sit down." Bramblestar bounded down the rocks from Highledge and showed the ShadowClan leader a space on the grass where he could rest his trembling legs.

"Great StarClan, Blackstar looks so old he's barely alive!" Cinderheart commented under her breath beside Dovewing.

Squirrelflight joined them from the nursery, where she had been helping Daisy amuse all the kits while Brightheart was out on a hunting patrol. "Is everything well in ShadowClan?" Squirrelflight asked, exchanging nods with Rowanclaw.

"We are fine," Blackstar rasped, so faintly that Dovewing barely heard. *It's been two days since the battle; why can't I hear anything yet?* she thought in frustration.

Blackstar seemed to be having trouble speaking due to the wheezing in his chest, so Rowanclaw took over. "We have to come to talk to you about the Dark Forest cats who still walk among us," he announced.

Dovewing flinched. What Dark Forest cats? She looked around and saw her Clanmates bristling.

"As you know," Rowanclaw went on, "the Dark Forest attack was helped in part by warriors from the living Clans." He paused and glanced around the clearing as if he wanted to name those cats right now. "Some of them survived the battle. We need to decide what should be done to them."

Bramblestar shifted his paws. "I agree this is something to think about, but I assumed each Clan leader would decide alone. It involves our own Clanmates, after all."

Blackstar struggled to his paws and lashed his tail. "We are still bound by our alliance during the Great Battle!" he hissed. "This is a problem faced by all the Clans, and therefore we should deal with it together. There cannot be any inequity between us."

"Whoa!" Bumblestripe breathed in Dovewing's ear. "He does know the battle is over, right? We're not allied with ShadowClan now!"

Bramblestar let his gaze travel around the hollow, ending up on the four cats who were apart from the rest, clearing trampled brambles from one side of the entrance. "Very well, Blackstar," he meowed. "Perhaps it's right that we should agree on a course of action together. Shall we meet on the island tomorrow night?"

Blackstar nodded. "I'll send word to RiverClan and WindClan, if you'll permit my warriors to travel along your lakeshore."

"Of course," mewed Bramblestar. He stood up and padded beside the ancient white cat as he started to leave. "Thank you for coming, Blackstar. Get some rest before we meet on the island."

Blackstar just grunted. Rowanclaw dipped his head to Bramblestar and guided his leader through the remains of the barrier, then ushered him into the trees.

Dovewing's fur had risen along her spine, and Bumblestripe smoothed it down with his muzzle. "Calm down," he mewed. "You're not in trouble!"

"But Ivypool could be!" Dovewing snapped. "And my father! These cats can't be punished for believing the lies that the Dark Forest warriors told them!"

Bumblestripe started to unravel the ivy knot once more. "We can't forget what happened, Dovewing. Perhaps they need some sort of punishment just to make sure they understand that what they did was wrong."

"Blossomfall is your sister," Dovewing mewed softly. "Do you really think she'd do anything to betray her Clan?"

The gray tom didn't look up from the strand of ivy. "Training in the Dark Forest was never part of the warrior code," he muttered.

"Nor was dead cats coming back to life to attack us!" Dovewing reached out with one front paw and rested it on Bumblestripe's shoulder. "Our Clanmates made a terrible decision, but when it mattered, they were loyal to us, and us alone."

Bumblestripe finally looked at her, his eyes troubled. "You really believe that."

Dovewing nodded. "Ivypool is my littermate, just as Blossomfall is yours. I would trust my sister with my life. Don't you feel the same way?"

There was a pause, then Bumblestripe nodded. "Thanks, Dovewing," he whispered.

Before Dovewing could say anything else, Bramblestar spoke just behind her.

"Dovewing, may I speak with you?"

Dovewing nearly jumped into the air. How had she missed him walking up to her?

"I'd like you to come with me to meet the other leaders," Bramblestar meowed. "Jayfeather will be with me, of course, and the cats who were trained by the Dark Forest, but I think you and Lionblaze should be present as well. You both know more about what the Dark Forest planned than many of us." He blinked. "Because of the prophecy, right?"

Dovewing nodded mutely.

"Good." Bramblestar turned away. "We'll leave at dusk tomorrow. Make sure you get some rest during the day."

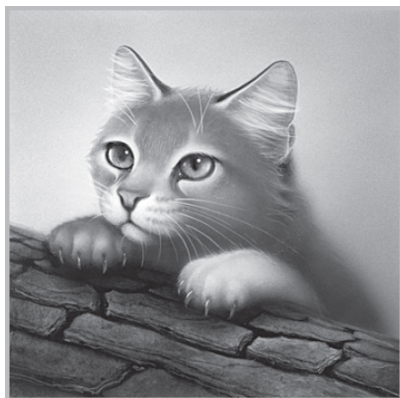
Dovewing didn't go back to helping Bumblestripe at once. Instead she stood very still, listening to the whispers around her. The rest of ThunderClan seemed excited at the prospect of choosing a punishment for the traitors among them. Dovewing felt a wave of impatience at their stupidity. *Can't you see that these are loyal warriors who made one mistake? Are you all so perfect yourselves?*

Then she tilted her head and tried to pick up what was being said in ShadowClan. Were those cats equally thrilled? But all she heard was the rustle of branches as Bumblestripe and Cinderheart worked beside her, and a burst of squealing from the elders' den as one of the kits stepped on a thorn. When she tried to picture the neighboring camp, her mind was clouded and fuzzy, as if it were filled with mist. Dovewing felt a cold trickle of fear seep into her fur. *Why can't I hear and see like I used to? Has something happened to me?*

She looked at Ivypool, who was salvaging clean moss from a bundle that had been dragged out of the nursery. Her sister had more than enough to worry about without Dovewing adding her concerns about her senses. Jayfeather was too busy with Foxleap and the other wounded cats, and Lionblaze was constantly out on

patrol. Dovewing recalled his broken claw during the burial, and winced. She could no longer hear, and Lionblaze was able to suffer injuries.

Has something happened to all our powers?



CHAPTER 4



A faint three-quarter moon showed over the tops of the pine trees as the cats filed across the tree-bridge to the island. Dovewing stayed close to Ivypool, trying to comfort her sister without saying anything. Ivypool walked with her head high and her tail kinked confidently over her back, but Dovewing knew she was scared of what might be said at this meeting. Bramblestar and Jayfeather led the ThunderClan patrol, and Birchfall, Thornclaw, Mousewhisker, and Blossomfall brought up the rear. The four cats radiated tension and the fur bristled along their spines; Dovewing wished they would relax and not look as if they had something to be ashamed of.

Blackstar was already seated at the foot of the oak tree, flanked by his medicine cat, Littlecloud. Both cats looked frail and thin against the sturdy trunk. Their Clanmates Tigerheart and Ratscar sat a tail-length off, ears twitching. Bramblestar stopped halfway across the clearing and gestured with his tail to his Clanmates, inviting them to sit down. “We’ll stay here,” he mewed quietly. Dovewing felt a stab of relief that he was staying with them rather than leaving to sit with Blackstar.

Onestar arrived before the ThunderClan cats had finished settling. He was accompanied by his medicine cat, Kestrelflight, and Breezepelt. The black warrior’s eyes flashed defiantly. *He clearly doesn’t think he’s done anything wrong*, Dovewing thought.

The three Clans waited in silence, listening to the rustle of ferns as the last cats approached. Mistystar emerged first from the bracken followed closely by Mothwing and Icewing. Dovewing blinked. ThunderClan had brought by far the most cats! What did that say about their loyalty to the warrior code?

Bramblestar seemed to guess what his Clanmates were thinking. “The other Clans lost cats who fought with the Dark Forest,” he murmured. “All of you survived, which is why there are more of us here.”

It didn't make Dovewing feel much better. She felt warmth on her pelt, and turned to see Tigerheart gazing at her. She looked away quickly. That was one complication she didn't need.

Onestar spoke first. "Why are Lionblaze and Dovewing here?" he asked. "They weren't part of the Dark Forest, were they?"

"No," Bramblestar replied. "But they know as much about the involvement of our Clanmates in the Dark Forest as I do." He stepped into the space between the four Clans and looked around at the other leaders. "We must pay attention to the truth of what happened and why these cats behaved as they did. The battle is over; they are no longer our enemies."

His fur was ruffled and Dovewing knew that in spite of what he'd said, he was troubled by the presence of so many ThunderClan cats. Whatever penalty was chosen, ThunderClan would be the most affected. The atmosphere in the clearing crackled with tension. It felt strange to have the leaders standing among the other cats, and the warriors who had been associated with the Dark Forest bristled as if they were ready to defend themselves with tooth and claw.

Mistystar raised her head. "As you know, Beetlewhisker and Hollowflight were killed in the battle, so they cannot answer for anything they have done. Icewing knows her loyalty was tested by the Dark Forest, and that she failed. But she has learned from this and I do not doubt her now. She has always been a good warrior. I would like to give her the chance to be one again."

"The same goes for Breezepelt," Onestar declared. "We suffered great losses during the battle. Why should I want to punish one of my few remaining warriors? We need Breezepelt on patrol, not wasted because of something that has finished."

"But they broke the warrior code!" Blackstar protested. He looked at Tigerheart and Ratscar, and his eyes were full of sorrow. "They betrayed the Clan, their leader, and themselves. How can this go unpunished?"

Onestar let his gaze rest on the ThunderClan cats. "I suppose we have to face the fact that some of our Clanmates were recruited by the Dark Forest, for whatever reason. Some Clans more than others," he added meaningfully.

Dovewing felt her pelt burn with indignation. Bramblestar opened his mouth to speak but Mistystar interrupted him. "There must be a way to move forward without further weakening our Clans," she meowed. "None of us can spare more warriors, so exile is not an option."

Dovewing blinked. *Exile!* She hadn't even thought that would be a possibility. She shifted closer to Ivypool. "You have to tell them what happened," she whispered in her sister's ear. "How Hawkfrost recruited you. You weren't being disloyal to your Clan! They have to understand that!"

Bramblestar overheard and nodded. "Go on, Ivypool. Please."

The gray-and-white warrior looked daunted as she moved into the center of the clearing, but when she spoke her voice was steady. "I think it would help to understand why some of us joined the Dark Forest," she began. Onestar and Blackstar bristled but Ivypool kept talking. "It wasn't because we hated our Clanmates, or didn't believe in the warrior code. We thought we were learning more skills that would help the Clans. Cats from the Dark Forest sought us out in our dreams and . . . and used our most personal reasons for offering a different way to train." She glanced at Dovewing, who blinked. *Was I one of those reasons?*

she wondered in alarm. Around her, Birchfall and the others were nodding.

"Hawkfrost approached me," Ivypool went on. "He made me believe that the best thing I could do for ThunderClan would be to train with Dark Forest warriors. I would be braver, better at fighting, more loyal to my Clanmates. He made me feel . . . important." She paused for a moment, then continued. "I overheard Hawkfrost and Tigerstar planning to attack the Clans. I told my Clanmates, and became a spy, reporting everything I learned about the Dark Forest. I knew other cats from the Clans were being trained, but to avoid suspicion I didn't say anything to them." She looked over her shoulder at her father. "Only when the battle began did I tell them the truth, and they instantly followed me back to our Clanmates to fight alongside them. They never intended to be disloyal. Like me, they thought they were being given a chance to be better warriors."

Breezepelt was looking smug and Dovewing felt an urge to rake his ears. She was sure he hadn't wanted to be a better WindClan warrior. He had wanted power and strength, that was all. Birchfall leaned toward Dovewing as if he could read her thoughts. "If one of us is to be forgiven, all must be forgiven," he mewed.

Blackstar heaved himself to his paws. "You have spoken well," he rasped. "It's Ivypool, isn't it?" He peered at her, his eyes cloudy. "But I saw my own Clanmates attack each other. How was that being loyal, or a better warrior?"

"We were promised a different way to serve our Clan," Ivypool insisted.

"I believe you," Mistystar meowed. "Thank you, Ivypool."

Onestar traced his forepaw in the dust. "I don't need to know why Breezepelt made his choices. I only need to trust him from now on. Which I do."

Blackstar shook his great white head. "I don't know if I can agree with this." He avoided looking at Tigerheart and Ratscar, who were staring at him in dismay. Dovewing felt a pang of alarm. What would happen to Tigerheart? She knew he was loyal to ShadowClan.

"It seems we all feel differently about these cats," Blackstar went on. He sounded confused, as if he couldn't understand why the alliance between the four Clans had melted away.

"With good reason," Bramblestar meowed. He looked at Breezepelt. "There is at least one warrior here who attacked ThunderClan cats alongside the Dark Forest warriors. I cannot see that as anything but a betrayal of the warrior code."

"Breezepelt never turned against his own Clanmates," Onestar mewed. "That is the essence of the warrior code, surely? And he is my warrior, so it is up to me what happens to him."

Mistystar nodded. "I agree that we should each be responsible for our own Clanmates. We know our warriors best, after all."

Blackstar flattened his ears. "But we must follow a single course of action! Otherwise how will it be fair?"

"ShadowClan does not get to decide anything on behalf of WindClan!" Onestar spat.

"The Clans got along better when we were united against the Dark Forest," murmured Thornclaw. "Peace has brought out the old quarrels."

Mothwing walked out from behind Mistystar and stood in the center of the cats with starlight gleaming on her pelt. "I suggest that each of these cats swears a

new oath of loyalty to the warrior code,” she meowed. “They walked a different path for a while, but now they must return to the way things were. They do not need to be punished—none of our Clans should suffer more pain—but we deserve to have some clear sign that we can trust them again.”

Dovewing breathed out in relief. It seemed the obvious solution, and from the nods of the Clan leaders, it looked as if they agreed. Ratscar flicked his patchy brown tail. “This oath . . . do we have to swear it now? In front of cats who have nothing to do with us?”

“No,” Bramblestar meowed. “I think this is a matter for each Clan to deal with on its own. What do you think, Blackstar?” he added.

The old cat waited for a moment before replying. “I will see that it is done as soon as we return to our camp,” he mewed.

Onestar dipped his head. “As will I.”

Dovewing felt another flash of anger toward Breezepelt. She had seen his furious attacks on her Clanmates. There was nothing noble about him! He didn’t deserve forgiveness from anyone. *At least my father and Ivypool will be accepted back into ThunderClan now, she thought. We have too much to do repairing the camp and building up our strength before leaf-bare to worry about what went on before the Great Battle.*

The cats began to file out of the clearing. Tigerheart drew level with Dovewing and caught her eye, a swarm of questions in his gaze. Dovewing turned her head away. He was part of the past, just like the battle with the Dark Forest.



CHAPTER 5



“Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather together!”

Bramblestar’s words were still echoing around the cliffs when cats started appearing from half-built dens and thickets of bramble. It was too early even for the dawn patrols to have gone out; the moon was still visible against the pale gray sun. Dovewing looked up at the dark tabby cat standing on Highledge and wondered how it felt to summon the Clan as their leader. If Bramblestar was daunted by his new position, he showed no sign.

When all the cats were standing in the clearing, yawning and ruffled with sleep, Bramblestar walked halfway down the tumble of rocks. “It has been decided by the leaders of all four Clans that any cat who fought on the side of the Dark Forest in the Great Battle must swear a new oath of loyalty to the warrior code.” A murmur rippled through the Clan. Bramblestar raised his tail for silence. “After this, the past will be forgotten in favor of looking toward our future. This Clan must be united if we are to survive our losses, and the leaf-bare that lies ahead. Is that understood?” He gazed down at the cats, and Dovewing noticed a few of them flattening their ears, including Dustpelt and Berrynose.

“You are asking us to forgive a great deal,” Dustpelt meowed, and there were nods around him.

“No ThunderClan cat finished the battle fighting for the Dark Forest,” Bramblestar pointed out. “When they learned the truth about their new allies, they showed nothing but loyalty to the Clans. There is little to forgive, in my opinion.”

Dustpelt didn’t look satisfied, and Berrynose hissed something into Poppyfrost’s ear. Dovewing looked at her father. Birchfall, Thornclaw, Mousewhisker, Blossomfall, and Ivypool were standing at one side of the cats, tails clamped down with tension.

“I hope this works,” Bumblestripe muttered. Dovewing rested her tail-tip on

his shoulder. *I hope so too.*

Bramblestar nodded to the five cats. "Come," he invited, walking down the rocks until he stood in the clearing. The warriors lined up in front of them. Bramblestar looked nervous for the first time, and Dovewing realized that nothing had been decided about the form this ceremony should take. How would Bramblestar know what to say?

"Warriors of ThunderClan," he began, "only you know the true reason you let yourself be persuaded to join the Dark Forest cats. That reason, whatever it was, no longer matters. The only thing of importance is that you are loyal to ThunderClan and to the warrior code, to the exclusion of everything else. Whatever might be promised to you," he added with a note of stone in his voice.

The five cats nodded. Bramblestar thought for a moment, then continued. "Repeat after me: I am a true warrior of ThunderClan, loyal to my Clanmates and to the code from this moment forward until it is my time to join StarClan."

Birchfall started speaking first, then the others joined, a little clumsily and bristling with discomfort. Dovewing felt a stab of indignation that Ivypool had to swear along with the others. She had risked her life spying on the Dark Forest! What greater proof of her loyalty did Bramblestar need?

When the cats had stumbled to the end of the oath, Bramblestar swished his tail. "Let that be an end to the divisions within this Clan," he declared. "You all know what you have to do to make ThunderClan strong again. Carry on, and may StarClan light your path." He twitched his ears as a signal for the meeting to break up. Most cats headed back to their dens to wash and sort out patrols, but a few stayed clustered in a group, Berrynose and Dustpelt among them.

"Are we really supposed to forgive and forget?" Berrynose protested. "If they hadn't given away all our secrets, the Dark Forest might never have attacked!"

Dovewing couldn't believe that any of her Clanmates would think this was true, but Poppyfrost was nodding. "Those cats need to prove they can be trusted," she growled. She glanced around fearfully as if she thought Birchfall might be inviting Dark Forest cats into the camp at that very moment.

Dustpelt leaned forward and said something Dovewing couldn't hear. She curled her lip in anger. *My ears!* She felt a physical pain inside her head. *What is wrong with me?* She had to speak with Lionblaze and Jayfeather, find out if they were losing their powers too. She spotted Lionblaze walking toward her and opened her mouth to ask if she could speak with him alone. Then Cinderheart bounded across the clearing.

"Lionblaze! I told you to rest today! You can't go out on patrol until your claw heals."

Dovewing realized that Lionblaze was limping, favoring the paw that had been injured while digging. "It's fine," he growled. "Stop bugging me about it."

Cinderheart narrowed her eyes. "Don't take it out on me," she warned, flicking her tail. "You should see Jayfeather if it's infected."

"I don't have time now," Lionblaze grunted. "We have to hunt while the weather holds." He looked up at the sky, which was bulging with dark gray clouds, so low they almost touched the tops of the trees.

"I'll come with you," Dovewing offered. Perhaps this would give them a chance to talk.

"Well, you're not going without me," Cinderheart meowed. "Come on, let's tell

Squirrelflight what we're doing."

She bounded across the clearing to where the deputy was standing. Lionblaze looked at Dovewing. "Are you okay?"

"No, I . . ."

Dovewing broke off as Ivypool emerged from the warriors' den. "Hey! Are you going on patrol? Can I come?" She trotted over, her fur fluffed out. "Anything to warm up! This wind is bitter."

"Sure," mewed Lionblaze. Cinderheart returned and they headed out of the camp, Lionblaze in the lead. Dovewing watched him stumble over a loose bramble and wince. She'd never seen him with a lasting injury like this.

They reached a clump of bracken above the hollow and separated to track prey. Dovewing picked up the faint scent of a mouse and crept along the trail, nose to the ground, letting the ferns brush over her spine. She had rounded an ash tree and was just casting around for fresh odor when there was a flurry of paws behind her and Ivypool lunged past, landing on a squirrel.

The gray-and-white she-cat delivered a killing bite and sat up, wiping blood from her whiskers.

"Good catch!" Dovewing mewed.

Ivypool put her head on one side. "I can't believe you didn't hear the squirrel coming down the tree," she purred. "It almost landed on your head! Have you got moss in your ears?"

Dovewing felt hot with embarrassment. "I . . . I was following a mouse trail."

Her sister stood up and started scraping leaf mulch over her prey. "Better go and catch it then!" she meowed, but there was a note of tension in her voice that Dovewing didn't miss. *Has Ivypool realized that I'm losing my powers?*

She marched into the bracken, feeling a sense of relief as the fronds closed up behind her. She soon picked up the scent of mouse again and caught the little creature as it nibbled on a seed pod. "Thank you, StarClan, for bringing food to us," she murmured over the tiny brown body.

She hunted around for another trace of prey but hadn't found anything by the time Lionblaze called them back to the path. A pigeon lay at his paws and Cinderheart stood beside him with a pair of baby voles in her mouth. Dovewing felt embarrassed by her puny contribution, especially when Ivypool puffed her way out of the bracken, dragging the squirrel.

Lionblaze nodded approvingly. "If the weather's turning colder, we need all the fresh-kill we can get," he meowed. "Good work, everyone."

They headed back to the camp. Lionblaze fell behind even though the muscles on his shoulders were tense with the effort of not limping. Dovewing slowed to keep level with him. When Cinderheart and Ivypool had vanished around a corner, she put down her mouse and turned to face the golden tabby.

"Lionblaze, I need to talk to you."

Reluctantly, he put down his pigeon and waited.

Dovewing took a deep breath. "Do you think we're losing our powers?" Ignoring the flash of anger in his eyes, she kept going. "I can't hear or see like I used to. You've been injured by a tree root, for StarClan's sake! And Jayfeather seems really scared of something. Could he be losing the power to walk in other cats' dreams?"

Lionblaze drew one massive paw over the pale-feathered breast of the dead

pigeon. "The Great Battle took a lot out of all of us," he meowed. "None of us know how long it will take to recover."

"But this isn't a battle wound!" Dovewing protested. "This is something else, something that has changed inside me! I can't describe it exactly, but I know I'm different."

Lionblaze kept his gaze fixed on the bird at his feet. "Talk to Jayfeather if you're worried. He knows more about this than we do. We're part of a prophecy, remember? I don't see how that could change."

Dovewing wanted to challenge him but he picked up the pigeon, making it clear their conversation was over. Lurching awkwardly on his infected paw, he trotted along the path and vanished into the bracken. Dovewing scooped up her mouse and followed, letting her tail trail miserably in the dirt.

"Jayfeather!" Dovewing shivered as a cold gust of wind whipped up her fur at the foot of the cliff. She moved closer to the bramble fronds as if they offered some shelter. "Jayfeather, I have to talk to you!"

"Really? Right now?" came the impatient reply.

Dovewing braced herself. "Yes, now."

"You'd better come in then. But don't touch anything!"

She pushed through the brambles and stopped, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dim light inside the cave. The sandy floor was covered with piles of herbs, some fresh and green-smelling, others wizened and dried into tiny black curls. Jayfeather was crouched beside Foxleap, who lay on his side in a moss-lined nest, his eyes closed. The medicine cat was peeling a dressing of leaves away from the warrior's belly.

Dovewing took a step back. The stench that came from the wound was overpowering. "Great StarClan!" she whispered.

"Exactly," Jayfeather commented dryly. Without moving his head, he reached out with one paw and expertly scooped up a wad of recently chewed leaves. "What do you want?" he muttered as he began to press the leaves against the open pus-filled wound.

Dovewing tried not to gag. "Can Foxleap feel that?" she asked.

"StarClan be thanked, no," Jayfeather replied. "I keep him dosed with poppyseeds to make him sleep, and he rarely stirs. I want him to stay like this until the wound starts to heal. Is something wrong, Dovewing? As you can see, I'm quite busy. Leafpool's out collecting herbs, since Brightheart is taking care of Sorreltail's kits in the nursery, and Briarlight has gone into the forest with Daisy to stretch her legs."

Dovewing moved closer. "I think something has happened to me since the Great Battle," she began. "My senses have changed. I mean, they're gone. I can see and hear like other cats, but that's all. And Lionblaze has injured his paw, which never used to happen. So I wanted to know if you had noticed anything different about your powers."

Jayfeather froze, his paws motionless on Foxleap's injury. Then his ears twitched. "Dovewing, this can wait. Let me do my duty to Foxleap, and to the other cats that need me to treat them. You're not in pain, are you?"

Dovewing shook her head, until she remembered that Jayfeather couldn't see her. "No," she meowed.

"Then I don't see how I can help you. I have to concentrate on my responsibilities to this Clan." His voice rose and one of his front paws curled up in anger. "Foxleap cannot die! We have lost too many cats already! Why does StarClan keep punishing us like this?"

Dovewing stared at the medicine cat in shock. "You can't say that! We defeated the Dark Forest cats! We won the battle!"

"Really?" snarled Jayfeather. "It doesn't feel that way to me. All I've done is watch my Clanmates die because there was nothing I could do to help them."

"You can't bring cats back to life," Dovewing whispered.

"Then what is the use of having any power at all?" Jayfeather hissed. He bent closer to Foxleap's belly, running his paw over the dressing. "Go away, Dovewing. Talk to me when I'm not trying to save a warrior's life. Right now, there is nothing more important than that."

Dovewing staggered out of the cave and stood at the edge of the clearing, letting the wind cool her scorched pelt. Something was terribly wrong with Jayfeather, that was for sure. Was it simply that the Clan had lost so many cats? Or did he know something about their powers?

"Dovewing?" called a voice from the elder thicket. It was Purdy, peering through rheumy eyes. Now that the nursery had been repaired, Daisy and Brightheart had taken the kits out of the elders' den. "I think I've got a tick on my back, an' I can't reach it," the old tom grumbled.

"Okay, I'll take a look," Dovewing mewed. With so few apprentices in the camp, the warriors were sharing duties among themselves. Dovewing knew it was Berrynose's turn to deal with Purdy but he was out on patrol, and since she was here, she wasn't going to refuse to help. She followed the tom into the den and waited for him to settle stiffly in his nest.

"Oh, that chill's got into my bones," he griped as he folded his legs under him.

"Do you want me to find some feathers for your nest?" Dovewing offered.

Purdy blinked. "Only if you've got time. I know you're all stretched, with so many cats still recoverin'."

Dovewing ran her paw over his bony spine, searching for the tick. "Most of us are okay now. Only Foxleap is still in danger." Purdy grunted as she rubbed against the tick. "Found it!" she declared. "I'll put some mouse bile on that and it'll be gone in a flash." She started to leave but Purdy beckoned her back with his chin.

"That can wait a while," he rasped. "Talk to me first. It's so empty in here without Mousefur." He stared at the abandoned nest, cold and dusty but still imprinted with the shape of Mousefur's body. "I miss her so much, you know," he murmured. "She was a grouchy old fox at times, but she had the best heart. At least she died protectin' her Clan. It's what she would have wanted."

"It is," Dovewing agreed.

"So why does everyone still look so miserable?" Purdy snorted, propping himself up on his front legs. "I go outside an' it's like we're still buryin' our Clanmates. Have they forgot we drove those blighters out? No Dark Forest cats around here, are there?"

Dovewing wasn't sure what to say. "I . . . think we're all aware of what has been lost," she stammered.

"And what about what we won?" the old cat demanded. "Did Mousefur, did any of 'em, die for nothing? It's an insult to their memory, that's what it is, to act like we lost everything." He slumped back into his nest with a cough. "Sorry, young 'un. I was forgettin' myself."

"No, it's okay, Purdy," Dovewing mewed. She reached out her paw and smoothed the tom's untidy black pelt. "You're right. We did win, and we should honor our fallen Clanmates by knowing they didn't die in vain. Now, let me fetch that mouse bile for you."

She stood up and squeezed out of the den. Sharp drops of rain splashed onto her pelt, and she ducked her head as she ran back to Jayfeather's den. She hoped he wouldn't mind if she helped herself to some bile. As she neared the opening to the cave, a terrible moaning sound stopped her in her tracks.

"Foxleap, no! Not now! I've done everything I could! Oh StarClan, why can't you let me help these cats?"

Dovewing nearly retched at the raw grief in Jayfeather's voice. Foxleap must have died—and Jayfeather was left in agony. What about Dustpelt? First his mate, now his son, lost to the Dark Forest. How would he ever recover? Dovewing rocked on her paws as Leafpool brushed past her, shedding leaves from her jaws.

"Jayfeather! What's wrong?" The she-cat pushed through the brambles and Dovewing heard a wail. "Oh no! Foxleap!"

"StarClan wanted him more than we did," Jayfeather growled. Leafpool began to murmur comforting words to him and Dovewing turned away, reeling with despair. She almost bumped into Graystripe, who was heading to the fresh-kill pile, his fur blown the wrong way by the wind.

When the big warrior looked down at her in surprise, Dovewing spat, "The Dark Forest is not finished with us. Foxleap is dead!"



CHAPTER 6



“Hargh! Hargh-argh! Sorry,” Sandstorm spluttered before another bout of coughing racked her body. “Hargh-argh-argh!”

Bumblestripe stirred beside Dovewing. “I feel sorry for her, but none of us are getting any sleep,” he murmured, his breath warm on her neck. “Maybe she should see Jayfeather.”

“I’m sure she’s thought of that,” Dovewing muttered back. Her eyes were gritty from lack of sleep and she wished Sandstorm would be quiet too, but she felt nothing but sympathy for the poor she-cat, who had kept them awake for three nights in a row now.

A dark shape brushed past Dovewing’s muzzle. “Have some soaked moss, Sandstorm,” urged Poppyfrost. There was a soft squelching sound as she placed it beside the she-cat’s nest. “That might help.”

“Thanks,” Sandstorm croaked. “I’m so sorry, everyone.” Dovewing listened to her sucking on the moss, then a merciful silence descended on the den and she drifted into sleep.

It seemed as if Dovewing had only closed her eyes for a moment before Squirrelflight was standing over her, prodding her with a paw. “Come on, sleepy hedgehog! I want you to lead the dawn border patrol.”

Dovewing stumbled groggily to her paws and followed the deputy out into the frost-sharp morning. Almost a whole moon had passed since the Great Battle and leaf-bare had fallen over the forest like a pelt of ice. Dovewing shivered as her breath made clouds in the air.

Toadstep joined her, squinting in the early light. “I can’t remember the last time I got a full night’s sleep,” he muttered. “I’m going to take Sandstorm to Jayfeather myself if she doesn’t see him today.”

Dovewing didn’t have the energy to argue. After listening to Squirrelflight’s instructions, she led Toadstep, Hazeltail, and Rosepetal out of the newly rebuilt

entrance and down to the lakeside border with WindClan. The moor was empty and quiet, draped with mist, and the patrol returned to the camp without spotting any trace of rival warriors. The clearing was full of cats sharing prey, stretching cold limbs, and talking quietly. Sandstorm stood in a corner, her back hunched in another coughing fit.

"Bramblestar!" Berrynose called to the Clan leader. "Can you ask Sandstorm to sleep in the elders' den tonight? She can't keep us awake every night, or we'll never be able to keep up with the patrols."

Dovewing noticed Purdy's ears perk up.

Bramblestar looked questioningly at Sandstorm. "What do you think? Would that give you a better chance to recover, if you're not worried about waking the other warriors? I know we're planning to build a second warriors' den to give you all more room, but that won't be finished for another quarter moon."

There was a flash of defiance in Sandstorm's green eyes. "It's just a touch of whitecough!" she croaked. "Are you saying that I'm only fit to be an elder now? I still have moons in me to serve my Clanmates!"

There was a harsh note of fear beneath her words that gave Dovewing a stab of empathy. *I know how she feels. Whatever's wrong with my senses, it's making me feel useless as well!* She hadn't made a decent catch for the fresh-kill pile in days, and her ears ached from straining over the boundaries when she was on border patrol. A tiny voice in her mind whispered, *What if your powers never come back?*, but Dovewing pushed it away. *How can I serve my Clan if I'm deaf and blind?*

Bramblestar padded over to the ginger she-cat and pressed his muzzle against her shoulder. "No cat is asking you to retire," he assured her. "I just want you to be as fit as possible for leaf-bare. And if you're keeping the other cats awake, you need to think about them as well."

Sandstorm lifted her head. "I'll ask the medicine cats for some honey." She sniffed. "I'll be fine. And why don't I sleep in the apprentices' den, since that's empty? That way I won't disturb anyone."

Purdy's shoulders slumped and Dovewing wondered if she should offer to sleep in Mousefur's old nest beside him. He must be feeling cold on his own, now that the frost had taken hold. Before she could say anything, Berrynose stepped forward.

"The warriors' den is kind of cramped," he mewed to Bramblestar. "Poppyfrost and I would be happy to sleep in with Purdy, if he'll have us."

The old tabby cat's eyes lit up. "Glad to give you room," he meowed. "I'd better go and sort out some nests." He bustled off, his tail straight up.

"That was kind of Berrynose and Poppyfrost," Dovewing murmured to Ivypool, who was standing beside her.

Her sister narrowed her eyes. "Do you think so? Or are they just desperate to get away from those ferocious Dark Forest cats who sleep too close to them?"

Dovewing stared at her in shock. "But it's been almost a whole moon since you swore your new oath! Surely you've been forgiven by now?"

"Not by some cats," Ivypool growled. "Haven't you seen how Dustpelt would rather wait until the fresh-kill pile has been stripped of all the best prey, rather than go up at the same time as one of us?" She padded away, her tail leaving a tiny line in the frostbitten grass.

"We'll sleep in the elders' den too," piped up Cherrypaw, nodding to her

brother, Molepaw.

That makes sense, since Poppyfrost and Berrynose are their mother and father, Dovewing thought. But then she saw Molepaw glare at Birchfall, and her belly flipped over. Those cats had done nothing but serve their Clan loyally since the Great Battle. How could there be anything left to forget?

"That's fine," meowed Squirrelflight to the young cats. "I'll join Sandstorm in the apprentices' den, and that way there will be more room for the other warriors while the new den is being built." When Sandstorm started to protest, Squirrelflight blinked affectionately at her mother. "I'll be there whether you like it or not," she purred. "It's too cold for you to sleep alone."

There was a flurry of activity as the cats scattered to prepare new nests. Dovewing stayed where she was, as if her paws had frozen to the grass. Her ears were buzzing again and shadows clustered at the edges of her mind, making her heart beat faster. Dividing the warriors into separate dens felt like a terrible omen; the Clan was splitting apart, in spite of everything they had survived together. Had the Great Battle been forgotten already? Or were her Clanmates determined only to remember whose loyalty had been questioned, without recalling the courage every cat showed to drive out the Dark Forest attackers?

"Dovewing? Are you all right?" Whitewing was peering at her with a concerned look in her eyes.

Dovewing shook herself, sending drops of mist flying from her pelt. "I'm fine."

"Why don't you help me fetch some moss?" Whitewing suggested. "It feels like ages since I spent any time with you!"

They squeezed through the new barrier of thorns, which seemed denser and pricklier than before, and trotted down the slope toward the lake. Their route to the best moss took them past the place where the dead cats had been buried and Dovewing slowed down to look at the peaceful mounds of soil, each one silvered with a thin coating of ice. "Can you see what is happening to us?" she whispered. "Do you feel as if you died for nothing?"

"Oh little one, you don't really think that, do you?" mewed Whitewing.

Dovewing jumped; she hadn't heard her mother come up. *Of course I didn't hear! I can't hear anything!* She took a deep breath. "It feels as if everything has gotten worse since the Great Battle," she confessed. "The warriors who were involved with the Dark Forest are being treated worse than rogues, and no one seems to remember that the cats lying here gave their lives so that we could win the battle." She couldn't bring herself to talk about her senses; that was something she had to deal with alone.

Whitewing rested her tail on Dovewing's spine. "All battles leave deep wounds, whether you can see them or not. And wounds take time to heal. You know that, Dovewing. Don't give up hope." She turned and headed down toward the lake, which was shining gray and still through the trunks.

Dovewing watched her walk away. She thought of Foxleap, dying from infection in the medicine den. *But some wounds never heal, whatever you do.*

It was the night of the Gathering. A huge white moon hung above the hollow, turning the cats to silver and casting sharp-edged shadows across the ground. This would be the first Gathering since the Great Battle, the first chance to see how the Clans they had fought alongside were faring, and yet the mood among the

ThunderClan cats was somber, even reluctant. Berrynose was muttering to Toadstep, close enough for Dovewing to hear.

"I can't believe Bramblestar wants to take Blossomfall and Thornclaw with us. Does he want to draw attention to the traitors in our own Clan?"

Toadstep flicked his thick black-and-white tail. "The other Clans managed to kill most of their traitors," he hissed back. "Maybe we should have done the same!"

Dovewing bounded forward. "And maybe you should realize that your Clanmates did nothing wrong when it came to fighting our enemies!" she spat.

"Dovewing! Stop! What's going on?" Squirrelflight trotted over, her fur fluffed up in alarm.

Dovewing twitched her ears, reluctant to let Toadstep and Berrynose think she was about to go running to the deputy with her complaint.

"Just a difference of opinion," Berrynose meowed. He glanced at Dovewing. "Some cats seem to believe we aren't allowed to think for ourselves."

Squirrelflight narrowed her eyes. "See that full moon up there? This is the night of the truce—and that goes for Clanmates as well as the other Clans. Come on, or we'll be late." She trotted to the entrance where Bramblestar was waiting with the rest of the Gathering patrol.

Dovewing glared at Berrynose and Toadstep, then followed the deputy. Blossomfall was waiting for her, looking troubled. "I saw what happened," the tortoiseshell-and-white warrior mewed. "Don't try to fight this battle for us. It will take time to prove our loyalty, that's all."

"It shouldn't be a battle!" Dovewing growled. "You swore the oath, and you did nothing to harm us during the Great Battle!"

"The warrior code means everything," Blossomfall reminded her. "And that's just as it should be."

They joined the other cats squeezing through the new barrier of thorns, wincing as tufts of fur got left behind on the prickles. "If this barrier doesn't soften up soon, we're all going to be bald!" muttered Graystripe.

As the cats headed down through the trees toward the shore, Dovewing trotted to catch up with Bumblestripe. They'd basked together in an unexpected burst of sunshine earlier that day, and she was feeling warm and affectionate toward him. "Wait for me!" she puffed.

The big gray-and-black tom paused and looked back at her. "Come on, little legs!" he teased.

They reached the shore with the others and turned along the stony beach. The pebbles gleamed in the moonlight, and tiny waves lapped beside them. Dovewing cast her hearing out the way she used to on these nights, listening for the preparations for departure in each of the other Clans. Were they feeling apprehensive about this Gathering, too? But her ears were full of the sound of paws crunching over stones and water washing on the shore.

Dovewing frowned and concentrated harder. *I must be able to hear something! My senses have had time to recover from the battle! I have to make Lionblaze and Jayfeather talk to me about their powers. What if we're all losing them?* Suddenly her paw was caught underneath a branch and she lurched forward. She would have fallen flat on her face if Bumblestripe hadn't shoved his shoulder underneath her to boost her back onto her feet.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Fine,” Dovewing snapped. “I didn’t see that branch in the shadows, that’s all.” She noticed his ears flatten with hurt and felt a stab of guilt. Even if she couldn’t tell him what was going on, he didn’t deserve to be treated unkindly. “Thanks for catching me!” she purred. “I’d have looked dumber than a sheep if I’d landed on my muzzle!”

“I’ll always be here to catch you,” Bumblestripe murmured. He nuzzled the back of her head before stepping away and they walked on in silence, close enough for their fur to brush together.



CHAPTER 7



The first thing Dovewing noticed when she reached the clearing on the island was that almost all the former Dark Forest cats were there. She wondered if it was because each leader wanted to prove that their Clan was united and loyal once more. She also thought that the other Clans seemed less hostile toward their traitorous Clanmates, but then, ThunderClan had so many more that had survived the battle. Perhaps it was easier to forgive one cat rather than several.

After spotting Breezepelt and Ratscar, Dovewing found herself searching for a familiar dark tabby pelt among the ShadowClan cats. As she watched, the warriors shifted to make room for Blackstar, who was heading for the leaders' tree, revealing Tigerheart deep in conversation with Shrewfoot. The pretty gray cat was gazing up at him as if he was telling her the greatest secret. Dovewing pushed down the pang of jealousy that twisted her belly. It was good that Tigerheart had been forgiven by his Clanmates. Any connection they had once shared was over forever. She had Bumblestripe now.

As if he had heard her thoughts, the gray-and-black tom joined her. "Do you mind if we sit with Blossomfall?" he meowed. "I don't want her left on her own."

"Of course," Dovewing replied, feeling a rush of fondness for him. They padded over to fill the gap left beside Blossomfall and Thornclaw. Dovewing ended up next to Toadstep, and she tried not to hiss at him when he curled his lip at her.

Mistystar spoke first, her gray fur tipped with silver in a beam of moonlight. "RiverClan is well and strong after a moon of hard work. All my warriors are united in making the Clan secure and full-fed for leaf-bare, and all the seasons to come. I am pleased to report that Petalfur is expecting kits with Mallownose." She paused to glance fondly at the gray-and-white queen, who preened. "A large pike was preying on the smaller fish on our side of the lake, but Lakeheart had the brilliant idea of placing stones in the shallow water to create an area the pike

couldn't enter. Thanks to this, we have protected many of the smaller fish to stock our fresh-kill pile." She dipped her head. "May StarClan light your path, all of you."

As she sat back down on the branch, Blackstar rose unsteadily to his paws. His white pelt was so pale, he looked as if he was part of StarClan already. "ShadowClan is as strong as it ever was," he wheezed, so quietly the listening cats leaned forward to hear. "We have rebuilt our dens and secured our borders. Our fresh-kill pile is full and we do not fear the leaf-bare ahead." His wide eyes suggested otherwise, and Dovewing winced as he fought for breath. "We were briefly troubled by a fox on our topmost border but my brave warriors drove it out." He sat down abruptly, his flanks heaving.

Bramblestar spoke next, then Onestar. Their speeches were similarly short and vague, with little news beyond the restoration of dens and borders, and reports of well-stocked fresh-kill piles. None of the leaders mentioned the Great Battle or the recent alliance between the four Clans, as if history had never happened. Dovewing narrowed her eyes. *Will everything be forgotten so soon? What about the cats we lost? Shouldn't we honor their memory somehow, all of us together?*

But the leaders were jumping down from the tree—or in Blackstar's case, lowering himself gently to the ground—and the cats in the clearing were already standing up, eager to leave. There would be no lingering tonight, no sharing of tongues and gossip after the serious business was done. Onestar led his warriors away first, swiftly followed by Mistystar. Bramblestar summoned ThunderClan with a flick of his tail and Dovewing found herself pressed among her Clanmates as they trotted over the tree-bridge and jumped down onto the marshy shore.

"That was weird," Lionblaze commented when they were crunching along the pebbles below the moor. "Any cat would think the most exciting thing that happened in the last moon was RiverClan losing some fish to a pike!"

Beside him, Cinderheart looked thoughtful. "Perhaps that's the best way to recover, to return to the way things were before as quickly as we can. We won the Great Battle, so nothing needs to change."

Bumblestripe twitched his ears. "Really? Do you honestly think the Great Battle didn't change anything? Sometimes I think it has changed everything."

Dovewing agreed with him. She watched him look sadly at his sister, walking a little way ahead with Thornclaw. Would ThunderClan be divided forever because of the Dark Forest?

The sound of coughing drifted through the trees as they climbed the slope to the hollow. Jayfeather trotted ahead, as sure-footed over the moss as if he could see. "Hazeltail, why are you still out here? You should have asked someone else to stand guard." He sniffed her closely and placed his paw on her side to check her heartbeat.

The gray she-cat looked exhausted and hunched. "I'm okay," she wheezed. "It's just a cough."

"And it's not being helped by this cold air," Jayfeather snorted. "Come on, you're spending the night in the medicine den." He started to usher her through the thorns. "Bramblestar, you'll have to put someone else on guard," he called over his shoulder.

Millie stepped forward. "I'll do it," she offered. "I don't feel tired, and there's

no point waking another warrior for what's left of the night."

"Thanks, Millie." Bramblestar dipped his head toward her. He looked closely at the rest of the cats. "Is anyone else feeling ill? Better to start getting treated now rather than wait until you're really sick."

"Toadstep hasn't eaten much today," Poppyfrost meowed, shooting a worried glance at the black-and-white tom.

"I wasn't hungry, that's all," he muttered.

Bramblestar narrowed his eyes. "If you don't feel hungry tomorrow, see Jayfeather, please. Now, let's get to our nests. Patrols as usual first thing."

Dovewing waited her turn to wriggle through the barrier. She heard Brightheart hiss to Cloudtail, "Why didn't you tell Bramblestar you've got a sore throat?"

"I'll see Jayfeather if it gets worse, I promise," Cloudtail mewed as he ducked into the gap.

Dovewing felt a tremor of worry. First the Dark Forest seemed to have left divisions that would never heal, and now the whole Clan was getting sick! *Oh StarClan, help us!*

Blinking sleep from her eyes, Dovewing stumbled out of the warriors' den at sunrise to see Jayfeather leaping confidently down the rocks that led to Highledge. Her heart lurched.

"Is Bramblestar sick?" she called.

Jayfeather stopped beside her and shook his head. "No, he's fine. I was just letting him know that Hazeltail will be off duties for a while." As he spoke, Bramblestar emerged from his den and trotted down to the clearing, where he arched his back in a long stretch.

The sound of coughing came from the cave at the foot of the cliffs. Jayfeather looked grim. "I think Hazeltail has greencough. She has a fever, and I don't like the way her heart is racing."

There was a gasp behind Dovewing. She turned to see Millie trotting from the entrance, having finished her post on guard. "What about Briarlight? She can't stay in your den if there's a cat with greencough in there!" She ran over to the cave. "Briarlight! Come out at once!"

There was a pause, then Briarlight's dark brown face poked through the brambles. "What's the matter?" she asked sleepily.

"I don't want you in there if Hazeltail has greencough!" Millie ordered. "We'll have to find you somewhere else to sleep."

Briarlight dragged herself out of the den with her strong front legs. As always, Dovewing felt a spasm of sadness as she saw the she-cat's haunches trailing uselessly behind her. "I wouldn't mind being somewhere a bit quieter," Briarlight admitted as she crawled into the clearing. "Poor Hazeltail hasn't stopped coughing since she arrived!" She stopped to twist and bite an itchy spot on her spine. "Besides, I don't need to stay in the medicine den now, surely? I'm not ill!"

Leafpool emerged from the cave with a bundle of soiled moss in her jaws. She put it down and looked at Jayfeather. "Briarlight's right, you know," she meowed. "We don't need to watch over her at night anymore."

Briarlight twisted around to look at Bramblestar, who had finished stretching and was licking his chest fur. "Can I sleep in the warriors' den, Bramblestar?"

Please?”

The leader frowned. “I’m not sure there’s room,” he admitted. “It’s still pretty crowded in there.”

By now, other cats had woken and come into the clearing, where they were stretching and arching their backs, ready for the first patrols. Purdy had emerged from his den and was listening as he smoothed his sleep-ruffled fur. “She’s welcome to join us in here,” he called, nodding toward the elder thicket where there were sounds of Berrynose and his family stirring.

Briarlight’s head drooped. It was obvious she wanted to join the warriors in their den.

“Why don’t I join you, Purdy, then Briarlight can have my nest?” Dovewing offered.

Bumblestripe came up to her looking startled. “But I’d miss sleeping next to you!”

“It won’t be for long,” Dovewing told him. “Squirrelflight is planning to build a second den for the warriors, remember?”

“Thanks, Dovewing!” purred Briarlight. “Can I go see my new nest now?” When Dovewing nodded, Briarlight hauled herself to the warriors’ den and disappeared inside, leaving a scuffed trail on the earth.

She reappeared a moment later looking serious. “It’s the right size for me, but it needs fresh bedding,” she commented. “Please can I have some pigeon feathers?”

Lionblaze dipped his head. “Why yes, leader. Anything else I can bring you? The finest fresh-kill perhaps? Soaked moss?” His tone was good-humored and teasing.

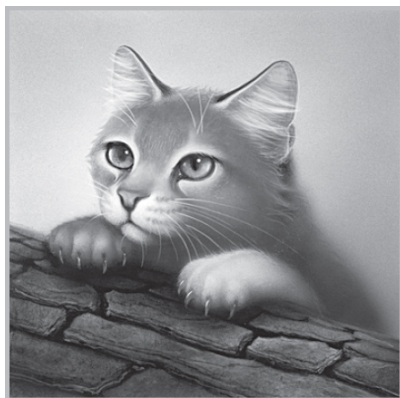
Blossomfall bristled. “Briarlight has to have the softest nest,” she insisted. “She can’t feel thorns sticking into her, remember? If she gets a wound, it could get infected before she noticed.”

Lionblaze rested his tail-tip on Blossomfall’s shoulder. “It’s okay, I understand. Squirrelflight, is it okay if I take a patrol to fetch bedding for Briarlight? We can go hunting straight after.”

The deputy nodded. “Take Dovewing, Ivypool, and Rosepetal with you. Make sure none of the moss is damp before you line her nest. And feel free to hunt a pigeon so we can use the feathers.”

Dovewing purred. This was a duty she would enjoy!

Briarlight’s blue eyes shone. “Thank you! I promise I’ll be useful. I can wake everyone for dawn patrols, and check nests for thorns while you’re out. There’s no reason I can’t have duties of my own now. I am a warrior, after all!”



CHAPTER 8



The warriors enjoyed only two nights of peace after the Gathering before Toadstep started coughing. This time Dovewing struggled to feel sympathetic. He knew he was getting sick! He should have gone to Jayfeather!

Hazeltail was still being nursed in the medicine cats' den, but as Toadstep didn't seem quite as sick, Jayfeather and Leafpool made a nest for him in the apprentices' den with Sandstorm. Squirrelflight announced that she was moving back to the warriors' den, saying that it made sense to let the coughing cats keep themselves awake. But Dovewing saw past the deputy's lighthearted comment to the strain in her eyes, and she wondered how many more cats would succumb to the illness.

Leafpool stood over the fresh-kill pile, making sure each cat was eating properly. When Dovewing selected a rather scrawny mouse, Leafpool reached out with one paw and stopped her. "I'll have that," she meowed. "You and Bumblestripe can share this squirrel."

Dovewing looked at the plump, fluffy creature. "It's huge!" she pointed out. "We could eat that for a whole moon!"

"Share it with Purdy, then," Leafpool urged.

Dovewing dragged the squirrel over to the tree stump, trying not to sneeze as the wispy tail tickled her nose. Purdy licked his lips. "What a feast!" he commented.

"Bumblestripe, join us!" Dovewing called. The big gray tom trotted over with Sandstorm at his heels.

"Is there enough for me?" she asked hoarsely. She looked tired, and Dovewing could count her ribs along her bony sides.

"O' course!" Purdy grunted with his mouth full. He shifted to let Sandstorm take a bite from the squirrel's juicy rump. Swallowing, the old tom watched as Toadstep shuffled into the apprentices' den, followed by Jayfeather with a clump

of fresh bedding. "Putting you and Toadstep together reminds me o' the time Firestar took all them sick cats to the old Twoleg den," he remarked. "That were a brave thing he did, keeping the rest of us from getting ill."

Sandstorm's eyes clouded. "It cost him a life, too," she recalled.

"Do you think we'll do that again, if more cats start coughing?" Dovewing asked as she scraped a stringy piece of meat from between her teeth.

Sandstorm shook her head. "I doubt it. I don't want to infect anyone else, but it wouldn't help to be in that drafty old den. Better for all of us to be close to the medicine cats." She looked down at her paws as if she'd lost her appetite, and Dovewing felt bad for making her think back to that terrible time of sickness.

She glanced around the clearing. Although it was sunhigh, the sky was thick with clouds and the breeze smelled of rain. The cats huddled over their food, their fur blown all ways so that they resembled pine cones more than sleek, well-groomed warriors. A flash of movement caught Dovewing's eye. Blossomfall was slipping through the barrier, not using the usual gap but forcing a new way at one side of the entrance. The fur prickled along Dovewing's spine. Was Blossomfall trying not to be seen? She battled briefly with a stir of suspicion and cast out her senses, trying to picture the she-cat on the other side of the barrier. She felt the familiar jolt of dismay as no pictures appeared in her mind, and nothing came to her above the sounds of her Clanmates eating. She shook the feeling away. *Where is Blossomfall going?* There was only one way to find out.

Nodding to the other cats around the squirrel, she stood up. "I'm just going to the dirtplace," she whispered to Bumblestripe to deter him from following her. She used the normal gap through the barrier, noting with relief that it was becoming less prickly. Outside the hollow, the trees clashed in the rising wind, and even though most of the leaves had fallen into heaps on the ground, little daylight seeped down to the forest floor. Dovewing trotted through the shadows, following Blossomfall's scent trail on the leaf mulch. Her heart was pounding and she kept her ears flattened, listening for sounds of danger. The buzzing noise had stopped but her senses still felt dull and heavy, and the half-lit forest seemed far more daunting and secretive than it ever had before.

Suddenly there was a rapid crackle behind her and Blossomfall pounced on Dovewing's haunches, knocking her over. Dovewing scrambled to her paws and spun around. "What did you do that for?" she cried.

"You were following me, weren't you?" Blossomfall challenged. "Why would you do that? Don't you trust me?" Her fur was fluffed up and her voice was harsh with anger.

Dovewing looked down at her paws, flushed with shame. "I . . . I was just wondering where you were going."

Blossomfall flicked her tail. "You may as well come with me, since you clearly think I'm up to no good." She turned and bounded through the trees.

Dovewing raced to catch up, feeling branches slap her face as they hurtled through the undergrowth. They emerged into a burst of daylight on the old thunderpath. Blossomfall didn't slow as she swerved and headed along the pale stone to the tumbledown Twoleg den. To Dovewing's surprise, she skidded to a halt beside the ivy-covered den and vanished along its side. Dovewing paused. *Is she meeting a Dark Forest cat?* She thrust the thought away. Blossomfall had done nothing to make any cat question her loyalty since the Great Battle! Dovewing

trotted after her Clanmate and found her bent over the dark brown soil behind the abandoned den. She was poking at some shriveled plants with one paw.

"I'm looking for catmint," the she-cat hissed through gritted teeth. "Satisfied? I know Jayfeather and Leafpool grew some here, and I wanted to see if there was any left. Our Clanmates are getting sick, and we have to find a way to make them better before we have to dig any more burial holes!" Her voice rose in despair and Dovewing felt a surge of sympathy, and guilt for doubting her.

"I'll help you," she mewed, her voice cracking with emotion. She pressed against Blossomfall's flank in silent apology, then began picking over the loose, damp earth. To her relief, she uncovered a few tiny green stalks still bearing leaves. "Do you think these will help?" she asked Blossomfall.

The warrior nodded. "Bite them off carefully," she instructed. "Leave the roots so they can keep growing."

With a small harvest of stems, they headed back to the camp. "I'm sorry," Dovewing meowed around her mouthful. "I shouldn't have doubted you."

Blossomfall stopped and put down her little burden. "I'd probably have done the same," she admitted. "Joining the Dark Forest was the biggest mistake I could have made. I . . . I'm not sure I can forgive myself."

Dovewing leaned over and pressed her muzzle against Blossomfall's shoulder. "You have to," she murmured. "For all our sakes. We have to move on from what happened, and find new ways to be strong." Her words fell like stones into the cold air. *Does that include me learning to live without my senses?* she wondered. *Just like Blossomfall, I feel as if I can't forgive myself if I am losing them. How will I serve my Clan now?*



CHAPTER 9



Dovewing paused to catch her breath before dragging her prey—a female blackbird, her brown feathers stained with blood after a rather messy catch—through the barrier of thorns. A quarter moon had passed since she and Blossomfall searched for catmint, and more cats had fallen ill. Two sunrises ago, Littlecloud had visited the camp to ask if Jayfeather and Leafpool could spare any catmint for sick ShadowClan cats, so it was clear the sickness had spread beyond ThunderClan's territory. Graystripe appeared behind Dovewing carrying a vole.

"Are you okay, Dovewing?" he asked, laying the vole at his feet.

"Fine," Dovewing meowed. She picked up the blackbird and started to push through the gap in the thorns. She emerged to see Rosepetal placing her catch, a young rabbit, on the fresh-kill pile. Bramblestar padded over to watch the hunting patrol return.

"Well done," he purred. "I know it's hard to keep the fresh-kill pile stocked when there are fewer warriors able to hunt, but we have to do everything we can to feed the Clan. If we're hungry, we're more likely to get sick."

Dovewing looked anxiously at the leader's bony haunches and the hollows above his eyes. She doubted that Bramblestar was taking his fair share from the pile, letting his Clanmates eat the best of the fresh-kill instead. Brightheart was the last to emerge from the thorns, stumbling over a thrush that hung from her jaws. She had left her kits in Daisy's care in order to help with hunting patrols, even though she was exhausted and thin from feeding Sorreltail's kits as well as her own.

She was followed closely by Leafpool, Berrynose, and Poppyfrost, who each carried a bundle of tightly wrapped leaves. Jayfeather came to meet them in the center of the clearing, and Briarlight dragged herself over to help unroll the parcels.

"Did you find any catmint?" Jayfeather asked, his voice taut with worry.

Berrynose shook his head. "We tried all the places you suggested," he meowed. "There was nothing but dead stalks. Sorry."

Jayfeather twitched his ears. "It's not your fault."

"Leafpool said this might help, though," mewed Poppyfrost, nudging her bundle toward Jayfeather so he could sniff it.

"It's fennel," Leafpool explained. "I know we usually use it to treat vomiting, but I've seen it help cats who are having trouble breathing."

Jayfeather nodded. "Good idea. Hawkweed could be helpful too, though I don't know if any grows in our territory."

"I'll take a look tomorrow," Leafpool promised. "I can think of one or two places it might be."

Dovewing felt a rush of pride in her Clan's medicine cats. Was there any plant whose use they didn't know? With their skill, surely ThunderClan would win this battle, too?

Suddenly there was a burst of squeaking from outside the nursery. "Help! Help!" piped Amberkit. "The Dark Forest is coming to get me!"

Dovewing spun around, her fur bristling. She relaxed when she saw Molepaw creeping up on the tiny kit, his front paws extended with claws safely sheathed. Dewkit and Snowkit raced up to join their littermate. "Stay back, traitor!" hissed Snowkit, fluffing up his white pelt. "You say you're a ThunderClan cat now, but we know the truth! You just want to kill us!"

Molepaw arched his back. "Aha! It seems you do not trust me, even though I swore an oath! Well, you're right! I am your most dangerous enemy!" He pounced toward the kits, his tail lashing.

Dovewing bounded over and stood in front of the brown-and-cream apprentice. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

Molepaw blinked up at her. "Playing," he answered innocently.

Dovewing hissed. "You know full well that this is more than a game. Why are you making these kits frightened of the Dark Forest? That battle has been won."

The apprentice's gaze slid sideways to rest on Thornclaw and Birchfall, who were sharing tongues by the tree stump. "Not entirely," he muttered.

"Hey!" Amberkit wailed. "Why did you stop our game, Dovewing? We were having fun!"

Daisy bustled out of the nursery. "What's going on? Dovewing, is there a problem? I wanted these kits to stretch their legs and get some fresh air."

Dovewing flicked the tip of her tail. "I don't think Molepaw has chosen the best game," she mewed.

The cream-furred queen narrowed her eyes. "All kits play at fighting," she mewed. "No one ever gets hurt. Leave them be, Dovewing. I'm sure you have more than enough to do." She whisked back into the nursery.

Molepaw glared at Dovewing. "You heard her. Stop sticking your muzzle where it's not wanted."

"You know what you're doing, Molepaw," Dovewing growled. "Perhaps you should think about whether it's helping the Clan." She turned away, still bristling. Behind her, she heard the kits leaping on Molepaw, squealing in triumph.

"We killed the traitor!" Dewkit declared. "ThunderClan is safe!"

Dovewing felt her heart sink. *ThunderClan will never be safe if we are divided inside the walls of our own camp.*

The following dawn, Squirrelflight told the cats to organize themselves into hunting patrols while she led a border check. Her voice was quiet and husky, and Dovewing hoped she wasn't getting sick as well. When the deputy and her patrol, which included Bramblestar, had vanished into the thorns, the remaining warriors looked at each other.

"I'll lead one patrol," Poppyfrost offered.

Lionblaze and Cinderheart padded across the clearing to join her.

"I'll come too," mewed Birchfall.

"Actually, I was going to ask Millie," Poppyfrost meowed. "Thanks anyway. Millie, will you join us?"

Looking faintly surprised, the gray tabby she-cat walked over to the group. Dovewing tensed when she saw the hurt in her father's eyes. How obvious could Poppyfrost be? "I'd like to hunt with you, Birchfall," she called. "Thornclaw, Ivypool, Mousewhisker, Blossomfall, will you come with us?" *I will not let my Clamates shun these cats for the mistake they made!*

The four cats joined her, and Dovewing winced at the gratitude in their eyes. Cherrypaw, Molepaw, and Rosepetal formed another patrol, and the three groups of cats filed out through the thorns. Poppyfrost took her cats toward the old thunderpath, and Rosepetal's patrol headed up the side of the hollow, so Dovewing led her warriors toward the border with WindClan, climbing up the hill to where the trees thinned out and it was easier to spot birds pecking on the ground.

Ivypool caught a thrush almost at once and covered it with leaf mulch at the foot of a holly bush. Dovewing picked up the scent of a rabbit that must have strayed from the moor. She followed it toward the stream, but stopped when it looked as if the creature had hopped across the water and returned to WindClan territory. Disappointed, she turned back and joined her father as he circled around a squirrel that was munching an acorn, so absorbed it hadn't noticed the stalking cats. They drew nearer, placing their paws so lightly they made no sound, and when they were less than a fox-length away, Birchfall pounced. He landed neatly on top of the squirrel, dealt the killing blow, and lifted his head in triumph.

"Nice work!" Dovewing commented. "I'll take it over to the holly bush." She picked up the piece of fresh-kill and carried it through the trees to join Ivypool's catch. She was just sweeping leaves over the fluffy gray body when there was a pounding of paw steps from farther along the ridge. Startled, Dovewing peered up the slope.

Cherrypaw burst out of the undergrowth, her fur standing on end. Molepaw and Rosepetal were close behind, bush-haired and wide-eyed in panic. Dovewing raced to meet them. "What's happened?" she called.

Cherrypaw slid to a stop, almost losing her paws on the loose mulch. "We . . . we . . ." She paused for a moment until her breath steadied. Then she blinked and looked straight at Dovewing. "We found the scent of a fox inside our border. It could be the one that ShadowClan drove out, and it's looking for more cats."

The rest of Dovewing's patrol crowded around.

"That's not good news," Thornclaw growled.

"It's worse than—" Rosepetal began, but Molepaw cut her off.

"We're going to let Bramblestar know," he chirped. "He'll probably want to

send a patrol to track it down and chase it out."

"We could go take a look now," Birchfall suggested, and Blossomfall nodded.

"There are five of us," she pointed out. "We should be able to challenge a fox!"

Cherrypaw glanced at her brother with a look that Dovewing couldn't read. "That's a good idea," she mewed. "We'll go tell Bramblestar and then come find you. Come on." She flicked her tail at her patrol and bounded downhill. Molepaw followed, then Rosepetal, who glanced back once over her shoulder before vanishing into the bracken.

Something pricked beneath Dovewing's pelt, as if she should have asked more questions, but Mousewhisker was already running up to the ridge. "Come on!" he yowled. "We can't let this fox get too far into the territory!"

The rest of the patrol raced after him. Dovewing brought up the rear, still fighting the feeling that something was wrong. Ivypool looked back at her. "Are you okay?" she panted.

Dovewing nodded. "When we get to the top of the ridge, we should stop. I might be able to hear the fox."

Ivypool slowed down. "Do you think so?"

"I have to try!" Dovewing hissed.

The warriors tore through the trees and scrambled up the last steep incline to the summit of the ridge. "Wait!" Dovewing yowled, and Mousewhisker skidded to a stop.

"What's wrong?" he called.

"Nothing," Dovewing puffed. "Let's just take a moment to listen out for the fox, or pick up a scent trail." They were close to the border here, and ThunderClan markers hung heavy in the air. Dovewing cast out her senses until her ears hurt. *Nothing!* Just the panting of the other cats and the rush of wind in the trees. *Perhaps the fox is lying still and quiet?*

Suddenly there was a terrible shriek. All the cats jumped, their fur bushing up.

"What was that?" gasped Blossomfall.

"It sounded like a fox," Thornclaw growled. "Let's go!" He took off down the hill, pushing through bracken that whipped back into Dovewing's face as she followed him. The horrific screeching continued, echoing around the woods. Whatever that fox was doing, it wasn't happy.

They burst out into a clear, sandy space on the side of the ridge. At the far side, a she-fox crouched, her lips curled back and her back hunched in pain. Dovewing froze. Had they run straight into an ambush by this dreadful creature?

But the fox didn't move. It pinned back its ears and snarled at them, but stayed exactly where it was.

"Great StarClan!" Thornclaw breathed in Dovewing's ear. "It's caught in a trap!"

Dovewing peered closer. Gleaming silver jaws gripped the fox's foreleg, so tight that white bone could be seen through the torn flesh. Dovewing gulped. She could only imagine the pain this creature was in. The thought flashed into her mind that it could just as easily have been one of her Clanmates caught like this.

"What are we going to do?" hissed Blossomfall. "It can't stay here!"

Ivypool was creeping across the clearing. "Come back!" yowled Dovewing, but her sister didn't stop.

With a howl, the fox exploded to its feet and lunged at Ivypool, dragging the

trap attached to its leg. Dovewing leaped at it, claws out, and landed on its neck as the fox's jaws snapped down toward her sister. Below, Thornclaw and Birchfall launched themselves at the creature's haunches while Blossomfall and Mousewhisker clawed its ears. The fox fought for its life. Half-crazed with pain, it thrashed and bit and lashed with its legs so that the heavy trap crashed into Thornclaw, knocking him to the ground. Ivypool darted right underneath the fox's belly, grabbed hold of Thornclaw's scruff and dragged him clear. Thornclaw shook his head, then leaped side by side with Ivypool at the fox once more, all teeth and claws and yowling.

Dovewing dug into the thick russet fur until she felt skin pop beneath her claw-tips. The fox flicked its head from side to side until Dovewing was dizzy, but she didn't let go. Dimly, she was aware of movement at the edge of the clearing. She glanced up, and her momentary lapse of concentration loosened her grip. The fox flung her off like a bug and Dovewing flew through the air to land with a thud on the earth. She gasped for breath.

A golden tabby face loomed over her. "Keep still. You've been winded." It was Lionblaze. "Watch her, Cinderheart," he ordered. Then he vanished, and Dovewing heard a fresh scream from the fox.

Fuzzily, she made out Cinderheart's features peering down at her. "We heard a commotion and came as fast as we could," the she-cat explained. She glanced up and winced. "I've never seen a fox fight like that before. Oh, Lionblaze, no!"

Dovewing fought to sit up. Cinderheart propped her against her shoulder. Lionblaze was crouched on the fox's back, sinking his teeth into its neck. Blood poured from a rip in his ear but he didn't seem to notice the scarlet liquid pooling into his eyes. Below, Thornclaw and Mousewhisker clawed at the fox's free front leg, while Blossomfall and Ivypool attacked its hindquarters. There was something in the way each pair of warriors moved, matching blow for blow, bite for bite, that reminded Dovewing they had trained together for a long time in skills the ThunderClan cats couldn't dream of.

The fox twisted its head around to snap at Lionblaze. Cinderheart lunged forward. "He's going to be killed!" she hissed.

Dovewing struggled to her feet and put out one paw to stop the she-cat. "He's okay," she mewed. "Let him fight."

Cinderheart turned to face her, her blue eyes ringed with white in fear. "But he doesn't have his powers anymore! He can be hurt now!"

"I know," Dovewing meowed. "My powers have gone too. But he's still the best and bravest warrior that ThunderClan has. Don't take that away from him, Cinderheart."

The gray she-cat held Dovewing's gaze, then slowly breathed out. "You're right," she whispered.

The fox let out another unearthly screech, which was abruptly cut off. With a hideous gurgle, it spat out a mouthful of blood and collapsed onto the ground. Thornclaw and Mousewhisker only just managed to jump clear. Lionblaze leaped down from the fox's back and stood over it, watching its flank heave one last time.

The bracken rustled and Bramblestar burst into the clearing followed by Squirrelflight, Cherrypaw, and Molepaw. The ThunderClan leader stopped dead when he saw the fox and the battered, bleeding warriors around it. "What in the

name of StarClan has happened here?" he growled.

Squirrelflight bounded over to Dovewing. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Dovewing wheezed. She stood up and gingerly tested each paw. Her ribs were bruised on one side from hitting the ground, but there was nothing seriously wrong.

Lionblaze prodded the fox with one paw. Its head lolled away from him and another gush of blood came from its mouth. "She's dead," the warrior announced unnecessarily.

Bramblestar walked over and looked down at the silver teeth still clutching the fox's foreleg. "Cherrypaw and Molepaw said they found traces of a fox inside the border. Did you chase it into the trap?"

Dovewing padded forward. "No," she mewed. "This fox was already trapped when the first patrol found it." She stared at the apprentices. "Wasn't it?"

Cherrypaw nodded miserably.

Bramblestar narrowed his eyes. "That's not what they told me."

"Nor us," Dovewing meowed. "I think they wanted my patrol to find it when it was alive and crazed with pain."

"Why would they do that?" Squirrelflight asked.

Dovewing let her gaze travel over the shamefaced warriors to rest on her brave patrol. "Because my patrol was made up of cats who once trained with the Dark Forest. Cherrypaw and Molepaw feel no loyalty toward them, and were willing to send them into great danger."

Bramblestar's hackles rose. "Is she right?" he demanded.

Molepaw shifted his paws. "We didn't know they'd attack it!" he whined. "We just wanted to scare them!"

There was a blur of movement, and suddenly Lionblaze was looming over the apprentices. "You nearly killed them!" he hissed.

Cherrypaw shrank to the ground. "We didn't mean to!" she bleated.

"Stand down, Lionblaze," Bramblestar ordered. "We'll return to the hollow. All of you who fought this fox, I want Jayfeather to check you over." He turned and stalked out of the clearing. The cats trailed after him, silent now from shame or exhaustion after the frenzy of fighting for their lives. Dovewing's head spun and she leaned gratefully on Cinderheart's shoulder as they pushed through the ferns and descended the slope to the camp.

Inside, Bramblestar was standing on Highledge. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here for a meeting!" he roared.

There was a ripple of shock as cats emerged from the dens or put down the fresh-kill they'd been eating. Bumblestripe raced over to Dovewing. "What's happened? Are you all right?"

She breathed in his warm scent and let it comfort her. "I'll be okay," she mewed.

Bramblestar barely gave the cats a chance to settle before he began speaking. His words were flung into the hollow like stones into a pool. "There are brave warriors among you today," he declared. "Cats who risked their lives to protect their Clan, who rushed into a situation without knowing what they faced but didn't turn back. They fought the most savage of enemies, and won. We are in their debt."

A murmur passed through the crowd and cats turned to one another in

confusion. What had they missed? Had there been an attack from another Clan?

Bramblestar continued: "Ivypool, Blossomfall, Mousewhisker, Thornclaw, and Birchfall, please come to the front."

The five cats limped to the foot of the cliff. Thornclaw's lip was torn, and a scab was already forming above Ivypool's eye. Birchfall and Mousewhisker were missing several clumps of fur.

"Some of you continue to blame these cats for the battle with the Dark Forest," Bramblestar meowed. "You are wrong. Today, these cats saved our lives. They were tricked—yes, tricked—into taking on a wounded fox. I am pleased to report that the creature was defeated and ThunderClan is safe. If you feel anything toward these warriors, it should be gratitude, respect, and the utmost loyalty. They have proved that they are willing to lay down their lives for you. In future, you will be prepared to do the same."

Dovewing looked around and saw that several of her Clanmates seemed uncomfortable, flattening their ears and shifting their paws. Berrynose and Poppyfrost were among them.

Bramblestar raked the Clan with his amber gaze. "Know this, warriors. The Dark Forest will win if we do not forgive those cats who were once their allies. Forgiveness is far more powerful than hatred and suspicion. United, we are as strong as we ever were. Divided, we will fall. Remember that the Dark Forest is still out there, ready to prey on our dreams. Hostility and distrust among us will give them more force than they deserve. Do you want that?"

"No!" chorused the cats.

Bramblestar tipped his head to one side. "I don't hear you!"

"No!" ThunderClan yowled, shivering the leaves on the trees.

Bramblestar lowered his head to pray. "Great StarClan, we thank you for giving courage and strength to these warriors today. May we honor them always."

His words were echoed by the rest of the cats, quietly like a soft breeze. There was a stir of movement near the front, and Dovewing stood on tiptoe to see Cherrypaw and Molepaw approach the cats at the bottom of the cliff.

"We're very sorry," Molepaw mewed. "What we did was wrong, and broke the warrior code."

"It won't happen again," Cherrypaw added.

Birchfall reached out with his tail and stroked the she-cat on her flank. "I believe you," he meowed. He paused. "Will you patrol with me tomorrow, Cherrypaw?"

She nodded vigorously. "It would be an honor to patrol with any of you."

Dovewing let out a sigh of relief.

"I still don't know exactly what's gone on, but whatever you've done, thank you," Bumblestripe murmured. "This means so much to me." He gazed warmly at his sister, who was surrounded by warriors asking if she was okay after the fight with the fox.

"I know it does," Dovewing whispered. She pricked her ears as she spotted Lionblaze padding to his den. "Excuse me," she mewed to Bumblestripe. She trotted after the golden tabby and stopped him at the entrance to the warriors' den. "Lionblaze, we need to talk," she announced. "Now."

The warrior blinked once, then nodded. "I know. Come on, let's find Jayfeather."

The medicine cat was waiting outside the cave. He didn't give them a chance to speak, instead turning his sightless blue gaze to meet them and saying, "It's time. Let's talk outside the camp."

The three cats padded across the clearing and out through the thorns. Jayfeather led them a little way into the trees and jumped onto a fallen tree.

"Our powers have gone," he mewed. "I have not been able to visit other cats' dreams since the Great Battle, nor can I see into their minds when they are awake."

"I can be injured," Lionblaze meowed, sounding as confused as if he had only just noticed.

"And I can't hear or see anything," Dovewing admitted. She raised her head to look at her Clanmates. "Why has this happened?" she wailed. "Are we being punished because the Clan didn't unite again after the battle? Or because too many cats died? Are we still the Three described in the prophecy?"

Jayfeather flicked his tail. "I don't know," he growled. "But I think there is somewhere we can find an answer. Are you two fit enough for a journey?"

"Of course," Lionblaze replied, and Dovewing mewed, "I think so."

Jayfeather jumped down from the tree trunk. "Follow me."



CHAPTER 10



The Moonpool gleamed like a single silver eye, reflecting starlight and the empty night sky. Dovewing caught her breath as she padded down the spiraling path, feeling her paws slot into the impressions left by cats from countless moons before. "It's beautiful!" she breathed.

Lionblaze shivered. "It's creepy."

Jayfeather led them to the edge of the water, as still as polished stone. "Lie down and close your eyes," he meowed.

"What's going to happen?" Lionblaze asked warily.

"StarClan will come to us," Jayfeather answered. "They alone know why we have lost our powers, and what this means for the prophecy." He settled himself on the smooth stone and tucked his paws underneath him.

Dovewing lay down beside him, then Lionblaze on his other side. Dovewing took one last look at the starlit water and closed her eyes. Her pelt prickled with excitement. *StarClan, are you there?*

The sound of rushing wind filled her ears, and she opened her eyes with a start. She was standing on top of a mountain surrounded by dark, starless sky. The wind tugged at her fur and cold seeped into her paws from the hard stone. Lionblaze and Jayfeather were beside her, leaning into the gale to keep their balance.

"Is this StarClan?" Dovewing yowled above the wind. Somehow she had expected it to be more . . . peaceful.

"No!" Jayfeather yowled back. "I don't know where we are!"

Great StarClan! This isn't the Dark Forest, is it? Dovewing thought in alarm.

Lionblaze pointed with his tail to the edge of the rocky plateau. "Look!"

Two figures were walking toward them out of the darkness. Not ancient cats lit with the light of stars, but mismatched, lumpen figures, unsteady in their gait and with fierce glowing eyes. One shape loomed over the other, broad-shouldered

and narrow-snouted. The other lurched over the stony ground, its hairless skin gleaming in the half-light.

"Midnight and Rock!" Dovewing whispered. She felt the fur along her spine lie down. Not the Dark Forest, then.

The badger and the blind, bald cat stopped in front of them. Midnight dipped her head. "Welcome you are," she barked. "Come far you have, after difficult time. Something to ask, I think?"

"Why can't I hear anymore?" Dovewing blurted out. "Or see?"

Rock turned his cloudy blue gaze on her. "Oh, I think you can still see," he murmured softly.

Dovewing felt hot with embarrassment. "Yes, of course, but it's not the same. I used to be able to see *everything*! Now I can only see what's right in front of me. And it's the same with my hearing."

"We've lost our powers," Jayfeather put in. "The powers given to the cats in the prophecy. *There will be Three, kin of your kin, who will hold the power of the stars in their paws.*"

"Jayfeather thought StarClan might know why we've changed," Lionblaze meowed.

Midnight turned her striped muzzle toward him. "Not from StarClan came these powers. But from older forces, from earth and water and stone and air. Losing your gifts you are, yes. That I cannot change. But losing them you are because they are not needed now."

Dovewing struggled to untangle the badger's words. "You mean, the Clans are safe now? They don't need us anymore?"

"Your Clan will always need you," rasped Rock in a voice that seemed to come from the wind itself. "And sometimes, so will the other Clans. But you will never face a battle that needs these powers again. The greencough that afflicts you now? That will be hard, but your medicine cats have the knowledge to treat you. You will still fight with your neighbors, but you have the skills to deal with them. Sometimes you'll win, sometimes you won't. That is the way of things."

Midnight lumbered forward and rested her muzzle on Lionblaze's head. "Brave warrior, do not lose faith. To enter battle when injuries are certain, that is true courage." She shuffled along to Jayfeather. "Medicine cat, wise you are, and such you know. Care for your Clanmates you can without walking in their thoughts and dreams. Let those hidden be from your sight." Midnight reached Dovewing, and she felt a blast of stinking breath around her muzzle. "Small warrior, many dangers there are in a world when you are blind and deaf. But eyes and ears you have still. Use them as your Clanmates do. Weaker than them you will never be."

The badger stepped back and heaved a great breath, as if so much talking had tired her. Dovewing wondered just how old she and Rock were. As old as the stars?

"Your powers helped the Clans to win the Great Battle," Rock told them. "That is what the prophecy promised, and that promise has been fulfilled. You will feel lesser warriors without the powers, but you are not. Find strength in the courage and skills shared by your Clanmates. The Great Battle has been fought and won. A new time for the Clans lies ahead."

"Remember also, Great Battle was not won by you alone," Midnight warned them. "All Clans, all warriors, all queens and elders and kits and medicine cats

fight together. To protect them all is not for you, powers or not. More has been lost than gift of sight or strength or dreams. But power of warrior code forever lasts."

There was a crackle of lightning overhead, making Dovewing flinch and close her eyes. When she opened them again, Midnight and Rock had vanished and for a moment a ginger cat stood in front of her, his green eyes glowing with love.

"Firestar?" Dovewing breathed, but then the vision was gone and she was standing at the edge of the Moonpool with Jayfeather and Lionblaze. The water was as still as it had ever been.

Lionblaze turned to her. "Are you all right?"

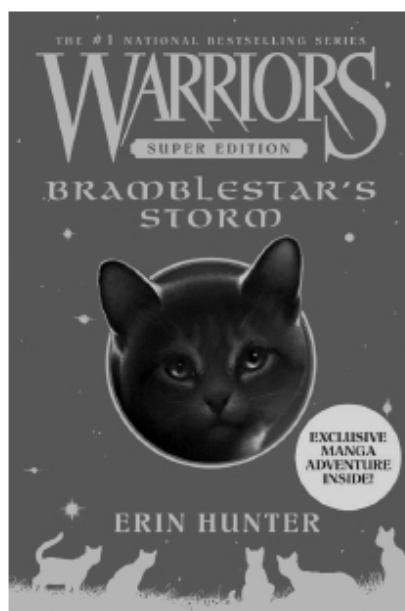
Dovewing nodded. "Better than before," she mewed.

Beside them, Jayfeather flicked his tail impatiently. "I have sick cats waiting for me. Come on, let's see if we can get back before dawn." He trotted up the spiral path, his gray pelt merging with the stone. Lionblaze followed but Dovewing hung back for a moment, staring into the pool. She felt a surge of hope welling up inside her.

The Great Battle has been won. We will survive the greencough. She turned to head after her Clanmates. Suddenly her paws felt lighter. And the warrior code will last forever!

EXCERPT FROM WARRIORS: BRAMBLESTAR'S
STORM

DON'T MISS
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BRAMBLESTAR'S
STORM



CHAPTER 1



Bramblestar pushed his way through the thorn barrier into the camp with the rest of the patrol behind him. The sun shone down into the hollow, casting long shadows across the ground. Above the cliffs, the trees rustled gently and a warm breeze stirred the dust on the ground.

Bramblestar could still see traces of the terrible conflict when the warriors of the Dark Forest had poured into the camp: fresh bramble tendrils entwined with the old in the walls of the nursery, and broken branches on the hazel bush that screened the elders' den. It was too easy to close his eyes and be plunged back into the storm of fighting and blood, with cats both dead and alive attacking from all sides. The Dark Forest cats had flung themselves into battle in a furious quest for power and vengeance, and it had taken all the strength of the living cats—and the strength of StarClan—to beat them back. Bramblestar gave his pelt a shake, trying to recall his earlier optimism. At least the dens were repaired, and the surviving cats had recovered from their wounds.

But the scars we can't see will be harder to heal.

When the battle was over, Jayfeather had propped a bark-stripped branch against the cliff below the Highledge. He had scored claw marks across it, one for each life taken by the Dark Forest.

"It will remind us of the debts that we owe to our former Clanmates," he had explained.

Now Whitewing was standing in front of the branch with her apprentice, Dewpaw, beside her. Seedpaw and Lilypaw stood watching with their mentors, Bumblestripe and Poppyfrost.

"Can you remember all the names?" Whitewing asked her apprentice.

Dewpaw narrowed his eyes in concentration. "I think so. This one is for Mousefur . . ." he began, touching the first claw mark. "She was an elder, but she fought so bravely! And this one is for Hollyleaf. She had been away for a while, but she came back in time to help us when the Dark Forest attacked. And this is for Foxleap, who died of his wounds afterward. . . ."

Bramblestar nodded as Dewpaw went on reciting the names. He had decided that all the apprentices had to learn the list as part of their training, so that their lost Clanmates would be remembered for season after season, as long as ThunderClan survived.

"This one is for Ferncloud," Dewpaw continued. "She was killed by Brokenstar when she was defending the kits in the nursery. And this is Sorreltail. She hid her wounds because she wanted to take care of the kits, but she died just when we thought we had won. She was the bravest of all."

"And the big mark right at the top?" Whitewing prompted. "Do you know who that stands for?"

"That's our leader, Firestar," Dewpaw replied. "He was the best cat in the

whole forest, and he gave up his last life to save us!"

Bramblestar felt a familiar stab of grief. *I wonder if he's watching us now? I hope he approves of what I have done.*

"I miss Firestar, too."

Bramblestar turned to see that Jayfeather had appeared at his side, the medicine cat's blue eyes fixed on him so intensely that it was hard to believe he was blind. "I didn't think you could tell what's in my mind anymore," Bramblestar mewed, surprised.

"No, those days are past," Jayfeather admitted, sounding a little wistful. "But it wasn't hard to figure out that you were thinking of Firestar. I heard Dewpaw run his paw over Firestar's mark and say his name, and then you sighed." He pressed himself briefly against Bramblestar's side. "I'm sure Firestar watches over us."

"Has he walked in your dreams yet?" Bramblestar asked.

Jayfeather shook his head. "No, but that's a good omen in itself. I've had enough warnings from StarClan to last me nine lifetimes." With a brisk nod to Bramblestar, he padded away to join Leafpool, who was sorting coltsfoot flowers and fresh-picked catmint outside their den.

"Come on, Snowpaw," Ivypool called to her apprentice. "Time for battle training!"

"Can we go too?" Dewpaw begged, as his sister scampered over to join her mentor.

"Sure we can," Whitewing meowed.

"And me!" Amberpaw raced across the camp and skidded to a halt beside her littermates.

"No, not you!" Spiderleg called from where he stood beside the fresh-kill pile with Clouttail and Cherryfall. "You did the dawn patrol this morning. You need to rest."

Amberpaw's tail drooped. "But they'll be learning stuff when I'm not there!" she wailed. "I'll get behind, and then I'll never be a warrior!"

Spiderleg padded over to her and gave her ear a friendly flick with his tail. "Of course you'll be a warrior, mouse-brain! Once you've rested, I'll show you the move they're going to learn, I promise."

"Okay." Amberpaw still cast a regretful look after her littermates and their mentors as they left the hollow.

"What about us?" Lilypaw asked, exchanging a disappointed glance with Seedpaw. "Why can't we do battle training?"

"Because we're going hunting," Poppyfrost replied briskly. "Come on! Bumblestripe knows the best place to find mice."

"Great!" Seedpaw exclaimed with an excited little bounce. "Lilypaw, I bet I catch more mice than you."

"I'm going to catch enough for the whole Clan!" her sister retorted.

"It's not fair," Amberpaw muttered as she watched them go. "Why don't I get to do anything?"

"I told you," Spiderleg responded. "You did the dawn patrol. Now you rest. But before you do," he went on, "you can fetch some clean moss for Purdy's den."

Amberpaw brightened up. "Sure! And maybe he'll tell me a story!" She darted off and thrust her way into the barrier.

"I wonder if I ever had that much energy?" Bramblestar mewed aloud as he watched the young cat disappear.

Sandstorm popped her head out of the nearby nursery. "You still do!" she told him. She emerged into the open, pushing a ball of moss in front of her. "It's good to see the little ones being so lively. It gives me new hope for our Clan." She paused, her gaze clouding, and Bramblestar wondered if she was thinking about her former mate, Firestar, who wasn't here to watch this group of apprentices grow up. Then she lifted her head again. "Daisy and I are clearing out the nursery," she announced, giving the ball of moss a prod with one paw. "There might not be any kits now, but surely some of our young she-cats will be expecting soon."

"I hope so," Bramblestar replied, remembering his earlier conversation with Berrynose. *I really hope so.* "Surely there are other cats who could help Daisy?" he went on, thinking that Sandstorm didn't need to be struggling with bedding, covered in dust and scraps of moss.

Amusement sparked in Sandstorm's green eyes. "Are you trying to pack me off to the elders' den?" she teased.

"You've served your Clanmates long enough," Bramblestar responded. "Why not let them take care of you now?"

Sandstorm flicked her whiskers dismissively. "I've plenty of life in my paws yet," she insisted, retreating into the nursery to help Daisy wrestle with a huge clump of brittle, musty moss.

Bramblestar watched the she-cats for a moment longer before turning away. His deputy, Squirrelflight, stood near the elders' den, sorting out the hunting patrols with Graystripe; like Sandstorm, the former deputy was one of the oldest cats in the Clan now.

"We need the hunting patrols to go out early," Graystripe was explaining to Squirrelflight. "With the days getting hotter, it's best to avoid sunhigh for chasing around."

Squirrelflight nodded. "And the prey will be holed up by then, too. I've already sent out one patrol," she went on, "but I'll send out another. Brightheart would be a good cat to lead it." She glanced around. "Hey, Brightheart!"

The ginger-and-white she-cat slid out between the branches that sheltered the warriors' den. "Yes?"

"I want you to lead a hunting patrol," Squirrelflight told her. "But stick to one area, and come back before it gets too hot."

Brightheart dipped her head. "Any particular place?" she asked.

"You could try up by the ShadowClan border," Squirrelflight suggested. "Millie spotted a nest of squirrels there yesterday."

"Good idea," Brightheart mewed. "Which cats should I take with me?"

"Millie, obviously, since she knows where the nest is. Apart from her, any cat you like."

"I'm on my way." Brightheart bounded off to call Millie from the warriors' den. Then she rounded up Dovewing and Mousewhisker and headed out through the thorns.

The barrier was still trembling from their departure when Amberpaw reappeared with a huge bundle of moss in her jaws. As she staggered toward the elders' den, Bramblestar noticed that the moss was dripping with water, leaving a

line of dark spots on the dusty floor of the clearing.

Squirrelflight stepped out to intercept the apprentice as she drew closer to the den. "You can't take that in there," she told Amberpaw sharply. "That moss is too wet. It'll soak all the other bedding and Purdy will claw your ears off for making his legs ache from the damp."

At the mention of his name Purdy ducked out of the shelter of the hazel bush. "There's nothin' wrong with my legs, or my ears," he snorted.

"How about your pelt?" Amberpaw asked, dropping the moss.

Bramblestar stifled a *mrrow* of amusement: Purdy's tabby pelt looked as if he had crawled backward through the thorns, the fur clumped and sticking up as if he hadn't groomed himself for a moon.

"Eh? Speak up!" Purdy complained. "Why are you mumblin'? Young cats these days always mumble," he added crossly.

"I was explaining to Amberpaw that she can't bring wet moss into your den," Squirrelflight meowed.

"What?" Purdy prodded the bundle of moss. "You're sure you weren't tryin' to bring me a drink instead?" he asked Amberpaw.

The apprentice looked crestfallen. "I was only trying to help."

"Sure you were, young 'un." Purdy stroked Amberpaw's side with his tail. "Come on. You an' I will spread the moss out here, just outside the den, an' it'll soon dry in the sun. An' while it does that, I'll tell you how I once killed a whole nest o' rats."

"Yes!" Amberpaw bounced in delight and began spreading out the wet moss.

On the other side of the clearing, Sandstorm headed out of the camp, pushing a huge bundle of used bedding in front of her. Bramblestar slid into the nursery and began helping Daisy scratch together the next bundle.

"Have you heard anything about new kits?" he asked hopefully.

Daisy shook her head. "No, but I'm sure we'll need the nursery soon, now that newleaf is here." She paused, then added, "Come and look."

She led Bramblestar out of the nursery and pointed with her tail to where Lionblaze and Cinderheart were sharing tongues in a patch of sunlight. "That one will be expecting soon," Daisy mewed, twitching her ears at Cinderheart.

Bramblestar felt a flash of excitement. He remembered play fighting with Lionblaze as a kit outside the nursery, and how he had taught him his first pounce. *In spite of all that's happened, I couldn't have loved those three kits more if I'd been their real father.*

Lionblaze looked up and noticed Bramblestar watching him. With a quick word to Cinderheart he got up and limped across the camp to join his leader.

"Did you want me?" he asked.

"No, but since you're here, you can tell me how things are going. It looks as if we might have some new kits soon," Bramblestar meowed with an affectionate nudge.

"Great StarClan!" Lionblaze gave his chest fur a couple of embarrassed licks. "No pressure, then?"

"Are you sure you're okay?" Bramblestar went on more anxiously, spotting a scratch on Lionblaze's shoulder. *He's limping on that forepaw, too.*

Lionblaze sighed. "Yes, I'm fine. Leafpool and Jayfeather checked me out, and gave me a dock leaf for the sore pad. It's just hard to get used to the way I can be

hurt now. All I did was trip over a stupid bramble!”

“Too bad,” Bramblestar mewed. “You’ll have to start watching where you tread!”

“That will make me very fearsome to our enemies. Not,” Lionblaze muttered. He limped back to his mate and settled down beside her.

Movement at the entrance caught Bramblestar’s eye as the first hunting patrol returned. Dustpelt was leading it; he carried a squirrel in his jaws. Behind him came Brackenfur, Blossomfall, and Poppyfrost, all laden with prey. Bramblestar watched approvingly while they carried their catch over to the fresh-kill pile.

He noticed that Dustpelt looked exhausted as he dropped his squirrel on the pile. The brown tabby tom was still haunted by the death of his mate, Ferncloud, in the Great Battle. Squirrelflight had told him that Dustpelt often woke yowling in the warriors’ den, thrashing in his nest. In his dreams he still tried to save Ferncloud from the claws of Brokenstar, and every time he had to watch her die again.

A little more than a moon ago, Bramblestar had suggested that Dustpelt might like to retire and join the elders.

“Anything but that,” Dustpelt had growled. “Let me keep busy. I need something to distract me, or the memories hurt too much.”

“You’ll meet Ferncloud again one day, in StarClan,” Bramblestar meowed, trying to comfort the older warrior.

Dustpelt shook his head. “Sometimes I wonder if that’s true.” His voice shaking, he added, “I kept some of the moss from her nest. But I can’t even smell her scent on it anymore.”

Bramblestar hadn’t known what he could do to help, except to do as Dustpelt asked and make sure he stayed busy.

Bramblestar headed across the camp, intending to praise Dustpelt’s patrol for their good hunting, when he heard his name yowled from the other side of the barrier. Startled, he spun around to see Brightheart bursting out of the thorns with the rest of her patrol just behind.

“ShadowClan!” she gasped as she scrambled to a halt.

“Calm down,” Bramblestar meowed. “Tell me what happened.”

“Are they attacking?” Brackenfur called as the rest of the Clan gathered around, their whiskers quivering with curiosity.

“No, but it’s almost as bad,” Brightheart panted. “We picked up ShadowClan scent inside our borders.”

“And it’s not the first time it’s happened,” Millie added with a lash of her tail.

“Are they after that nest of squirrels?” Lionblaze asked.

More cats jumped in with urgent questions. Only Dovewing looked quiet and subdued. Bramblestar felt a stab of pity. Once she would have been able to look into ShadowClan without leaving the hollow, and listen to their conversations to find out why they were crossing the border, but those days were gone. *She feels blind and deaf without her powers*, he guessed.

Bumblestripe padded up to Dovewing and pressed his muzzle against her shoulder. “Are you okay?” he whispered.

Dovewing leaned into him. “I’m fine,” she sighed.

Bramblestar raised his tail for silence. “Brightheart, where exactly—” he began.

"We should attack *now!*" Mousewhisker interrupted, his shoulder fur bristling with fury. "Those crow-food eaters have no right to set paw on our territory."

For a moment a cold trickle of suspicion passed through Bramblestar. Mousewhisker had been one of the cats who had trained in the Dark Forest, and although he had returned to his Clan, he seemed a bit too ready to attack their neighbors. Did he want to try out the skills he had learned from his Dark Forest mentors? Bramblestar thrust the suspicion away. *Mousewhisker is young, and young cats are hotheaded.*

"No cat will attack any of the Clans," he warned.

"Try telling that to WindClan," Rosepetal muttered, flicking the ear that Nightcloud had scratched that morning.

"So what are we going to do about ShadowClan?" Millie asked.

"We're not going to let ShadowClan get away with this, are we?" Berrynose meowed. He sounded almost as belligerent as Mousewhisker.

"Not at all," Bramblestar replied. "I'm going to visit Blackstar, and find out why his warriors are crossing our border."

"Seriously?" Mousewhisker's eyes stretched wide, and his voice was even more indignant than before. "You're going to give them a chance to come up with a reason, when we all know what they're doing is wrong?"

"Mouse-brain!" Mousewhisker's sister Cherryfall gave him a hard nudge, almost unbalancing him. "That isn't what Bramblestar is doing. He's just going to tell Blackstar that he knows what's going on!"

Bramblestar was touched by the ginger she-cat's faith in him. *My Clanmates should be able to trust me to keep them safe. What would they say if they knew how much I doubt myself?*

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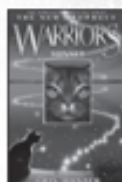
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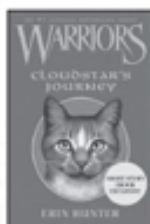
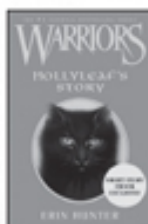
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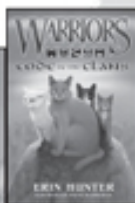
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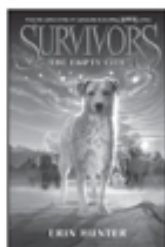
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ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the bestselling Seekers and Survivors series.

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